

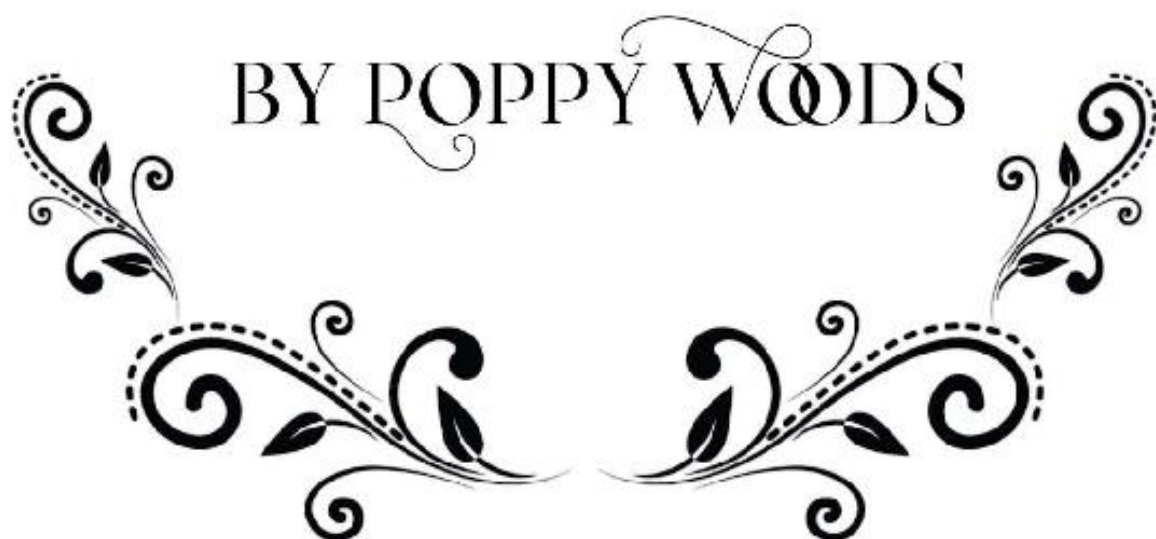
POPPY WOODS

TREASURED





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Treasured
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Created with Vellum

*Sometimes the princess doesn't need to be saved.
And sometimes, the dragon does the saving.*

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Love and Chaos](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More from Poppy Woods](#)

CHAPTER ONE



I smooth my hands down the front of my dress, eyeing my profile in the mirror. Today the royals from the other kingdoms in Lazoreat will be arriving and I'll be expected to look my best. The yellow dress is perfect for early spring—it's happy and bright, just like the weather.

Just like the jubilee will be.

This is always my favorite time of year. The jubilee is a time of celebration, a time for the royals of Lazoreat to come together and rejoice in the peace we've upheld for so long.

"Will you be needing anything else, princess?" Serafina's voice catches me off guard and my head snaps up, meeting her gaze in the mirror. She's worked in the castle alongside the rest of her family since we were both children, but she was only recently promoted to lady's maid.

"I don't think so," I answer, smiling at her. She blushes and dips her head respectfully before scurrying from my bedchamber. She has barely spoken to me since she took the new position. Part of me knows it's because she's intimidated by working so closely with a sapphic . . . and that annoys me to no end. Serafina is nothing like my usual type. She's far too wholesome, far too proper, and entirely too much of a gossip. With a roll of my eyes, I tuck a wayward strand of hair behind my ear before I make my way into the hall.

"Taryn!" Mira calls from the other end of the long hallway. She was waiting for me, no doubt. I smirk as she nearly runs down the stone

corridor toward me, her red hair flowing around her face as she flies past a servant carrying an arm full of laundry.

“And what are you doing in the eastern wing, hmm?” I ask as she bustles up to my side, linking her arm with mine.

“Impatiently waiting for the spoiled princess of this Gods forsaken kingdom to wake up and entertain me, of course,” she snickers as we begin walking down the hall together.

“Your tongue is going to get you into some dire sort of trouble someday,” I point out as we make our way across the allure. The early morning sun casts subtle golden highlights in Mira’s hair as she purses her lips beside me.

“Yours already has,” she reminds me. “What happened to your last maid? I saw the new one running from your room like it was on fire.”

“I’m not sure why Serafina is so—” I stop when her first words sink in. “I had nothing to do with that!” I jerk my arm from her hold, narrowing my eyes on her as we come to a stop in the doorway. “She never *told* me she was betrothed, Mira. Surely, you know me better than that.”

“I know you’ve got a taste for trouble,” she laughs, wagging her finger before she heads indoors. “If I were to do such a thing, I’d never find a suitable husband. I’m not sure if you escape the worst of the gossip because you’re sapphic or because you’re a princess.”

“The former, I’m sure,” I drawl out slowly, smiling to a group of servants as we make our way down the main hall. I glance up at the portraits lining the stone walls and sigh. “People love to gossip about the affairs of princesses, I assure you. But mine can produce no bastards, so I would assume I’m immune from the idle chattering of bored courtiers.”

“Did you just insult me?” she asks, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder.

I wiggle my eyebrows before turning down the staircase that would lead us to the dining room. “The jubilee starts soon. The royals should start arriving today, I think.”

“Tabistak is always the first to arrive. I can’t wait to see Dary, I’ve missed him,” Mira rushes out excitedly.

“I’ve missed him, too. His father relies so heavily on him, now.” It was true. When we were children, Dary would spend entire summers in Vanir, aggravating us. As we grew older, he had to take more responsibility in his own kingdom, and we saw less and less of him each year.

At first, I thought the change in his visits had something to do with us calling off the wedding our parents planned for us. Even as a teenager, I knew Dary didn't hold it against me, but I could never be sure about his parents. They're such quiet people, it unnerves me.

"We'll make the most of our week with him," Mira promises with a chuckle. "I'm sure we can annoy him enough in one week to last an entire year." As we reach the bottom of the landing, Mira turns around to face me, winking as she walks backward.

Right into the mage.

"Oh!" she mumbles, spinning around to right herself. Her hands fly out to steady herself against the woman she bumped into and I cover my mouth to hide my smile.

"Ladies," Ona hisses, taking a quick step back from Mira's pawing hands. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Lady Ona," we both murmur in unison.

"I'm so sorry, Lady Ona," Mira rushes on. "I should have been paying closer attention."

"It's alright, child," she sniffs, her long hair—so white it nearly glows with silver light—flowing down to her waist as she juts her chin into the air. "I'll leave you to your preparations. Enjoy the jubilee, girls." Her tone is kind but the look of disgust on her face gives away her true feelings far too easily.

Father's mage has never cared for me. I'm not sure why, but she's found me a nuisance around the castle since I was a child. I can still hear my mother chiding her for being cold to me; Ona never approved of little ones running around unsupervised and I was notorious for slipping past Nanny.

"I have no idea why my father still employs that woman," I sigh, shaking my head. Something about her has always rubbed me the wrong way, but I suppose some people are just that way, as if we are made from two different things that react poorly with one another. Like a potion gone awry.

"Do you think he's keen on her?" Mira asks, glancing over her shoulder to watch the mage's retreat.

"Gods, no," I laugh. "He hasn't taken interest in anyone since my mother died—" I pause, wondering for a moment if it were possible my father has kept an affair a secret for this long. "At least, not any that were

noticeable enough for the servants to gossip, or important enough for him to tell me.”

“Mm,” Mira muses. “It would explain why she isn’t fond of you.”

“It is possible she just doesn’t like me,” I laugh, shaking my head as we move toward the dining hall.

“What blasphemy is this? Everyone *loves* Taryn of Vanir. Haven’t you heard? The men want her but can’t have her. The women want her or want to *be* her. Taryn of Vanir is what all of us—”

I close my hand over her mouth, swallowing my laughter. “That’s enough of that, you’re going to cause a spectacle, Mira. I swear you’re the most troublesome thing I ever dared to call a friend!” When she licks my palm, forcing me to pull my hand away, I roll my eyes. “And childish, too.”

“It’s all true, if not quite that theatric. You’re well-liked by everyone, Taryn. Truly, Ona is the only person I’ve ever seen eye you with disdain. It’s strange to me.”

“Well,” I sigh. “I suppose it’s possible. Or perhaps, she wishes it were?” I shrug, dismissing the strange thoughts of my father pursuing someone as cold as Ona DiAllo. My mother was a light in this world, with all the warmth of a sun packed into a person who could wrap their arms around you. Someone like Ona could never fill the void her death left.

Though, I do want happiness for him. My father deserves to find someone to fill his heart. He’s mourned my mother for far too long, and though I know it’s the tragedy of truly loving someone . . . it breaks my heart to see him lonely and unhappy. Year after year, I pray the Gods will bring him a new love, someone who can make him happy again. He deserves that happiness.

We all do.

As we pass a group of knights gathered near the door, Mira giggles and smiles at them. Several walk over, holding out mugs in offering. I take one, sniffing the contents before I smile. “Ale? With your breakfast? Truly, you’re deviants, the lot of you.”

“Ah, but the jubilee is here, princess,” Sir Edin laughs. “Surely, we can make an exception.”

I take a long swig of the drink, watching as Mira does the same. She’s never been able to hold her ale, but she’s clearly eager to impress one of

these men. Perhaps the one with the curly dark hair? I don't know his name.

"Are you very excited for the jubilee?" she asks, turning to face precisely the one I thought might have caught her eye.

"I am. I'll be in the tournament this year." His lopsided grin never falters as he speaks with her and it takes everything in me not to roll my eyes. Mira is a *hopeless* romantic. She's convinced some great love will show up and steal her heart in the dead of the night after some chance meeting at one the Vanir galas.

I don't share her views. I'm not sure if I'll ever find someone to truly share my heart with in such a way, not like in Mira's fairy tales . . . not like my parents.

Ever since Mother's carriage was struck down during a dragon's raid, my father has closed his heart to everyone except me. He's kind to the people around him, he treats the staff and his advisors well, but he isn't the same man who raised me. He isn't as happy or as open.

Though, who can blame him?

"Taryn," Mira hisses, gaining my attention.

"Hmm?" I answer, taking another sip of the mug Sir Edin gave me. He chuckles, elbowing the man to his right.

"Sir Callum was saying he hopes to win a favor from the lovely princess at this year's jubilee," she snickers, covering her mouth. My eyes go wide, and I nearly spit the ale back into the mug, meeting the steel blue eyes of the man standing across from my friend.

He's not unattractive, as far as men go. The curly hair is a nice touch, at least. His eyes are beautiful, his chin and jaw are strong, and from what I can tell he's quite fit beneath the armor he's wearing. But, none of that changes the simple truth.

"I do not offer favors at the jubilee," I laugh, shaking my head.

"Why not? Isn't it customary?"

"It is," I reply, pursing my lips against my smile. "But there aren't many female competitors in the tournament, I'm afraid. So, it would be quite a waste of time for everyone involved."

Callum's eyes go wide and his cheeks flush pink beneath the dark hair dusting his jaw. "Oh, the rumors, well—"

"All true, I'm sure," I chuckle.

“So disappointing, isn’t it?” Mira asks, taking a sip from her own mug with a smug smile. I glance at her, smirking as she relishes in embarrassing the poor man.

“I’m sure Callum isn’t *too* disappointed, Lady Mira,” Edin scoffs. “He still has a chance at your favor, does he not?”

“Hmm,” Mira muses quietly, inspecting the knight slowly and quite obviously. “Perhaps.”

Callum opens his mouth to speak but the sound of bells quickly fills the castle. I quickly turn to Mira, a smile spreading across her face as soon as she looks at me.

“Dary!” we murmur in unison, handing our mugs off to the men before us. Mira grips my hand tightly and runs from the dining hall, dragging me along behind her. Neither of us have had a bite to eat and we each drank at least half a mug of ale. My cheeks flush with warmth as we rush through the castle toward the courtyard.

Just as we slide through the large door, out onto the steps, the gate raises, and horses slowly prance through. Dary sits on a horse to his father’s right. I wave to him even as I bow my head respectfully to the Tabistaks. Their family has been ruling their kingdom for even longer than my father’s family has been on the throne of Vanir. They’re old royalty.

Though, as far as old royalty goes, I’m technically the most bred royal in Lazoreat. My mother was a Lazoras—a member of the last bloodline to rule all of Lazoreat as one, united kingdom.

The stories she told me as a child about our family’s history still spin in my mind sometimes. The history of our line can be traced back to the elves who inhabited this land in the old days. I often wondered, as a child, where the elves went. No one has the answer. Perhaps they retreated into the mountains with the dragons.

“Princess Taryn,” King Morren smiles as he slides from his horse. “Always a pleasure. Where’s Godfrey?”

“Coming, I’m sure.” I turn to the queen and smile at her before nodding my head respectfully. “Queen Danica.”

“Hello, Taryn,” she laughs as her husband helps her down from her mount. “We won’t keep you. I know you two probably have plans for him, but *do* stay out of trouble, please?”

I bat my eyelashes as innocently as possible. “Why, Queen Danica . . . I’m offended you’d think me capable of such mischief.” The smile curving

my lips gives away the lie, even as Dary throws his arm over my shoulder then Mira's.

"I'll keep them out of trouble, Mother, don't you worry."

"That's *precisely* what I worry about," she mutters, waving her hand at us. "Good to see you, Mira, dear."

"Thank you, Queen Danica." She bows her head and curtsies before we scurry off away from the horses. Dary's arm never falters from around either of our necks all the way to the door. I nudge him slightly and shake my head.

"You're incorrigible," I mutter.

"And yet, you've missed me," he laughs, pressing a chaste kiss to my cheek.

"Ah, ah," Mira chides. "You'll start up rumors that you two have finally '*found your way*' as Ona put it." She steps away from Dary and up the stairs that lead into the castle.

"That's true," I remind him. "Last year, she droned on about it for weeks after you left."

"Well, I've been accused of worse things than trying to woo a princess." His green eyes twinkle with mischief as he goads me. He knows very well how I feel about those particular rumors.

"And I've never been accused of anything worse," I chuckle, following Mira up the stairs as Dary clutches his chest dramatically.

"I'm wounded, truly."

"Do you know what the truth is, Dary?" I ask over my shoulder, fighting a smile as we make our way toward the dining hall. Several knights bow to our party, making sure to greet the prince.

"Can you remind me, love?" he asks, nodding to each man we pass. I roll my eyes as we walk into the dining hall for the second time this morning, this time making straight for the table near my father's throne. There is no one seated there, not even Ona. I'm sure she's with Father, greeting the Tabistaks in the courtyard. Perhaps Mira is on to something, maybe Ona *does* fancy my father.

"The truth is that thing you eventually admit to after I kick you hard enough." Before I'm through sitting, servants begin bringing food to the table for the three of us.

"You haven't kicked me in years, Taryn. Why break such a good streak?"

“I think you’ve grown more annoying in the past year,” I laugh, taking a sip from the mug in front of me.

“I think he missed us,” Mira chuckles as she takes a bite of a roll.

“That I did,” he admits, smiling at the two of us. “Vanir will always be a second home.” Dary’s eyes slip to Mira for a brief moment, barely long enough for me to notice at all, and my eyebrow raises. I’ve long suspected Mira had a *crush* on Dary, but it’s never seemed serious enough to mention on either of our parts. I’ve never noticed before now, though, how Dary stares at Mira as if *she’s* the home he’s speaking of.

CHAPTER TWO



My fists clench in my skirt, hiking it up as we march through the tall grass to the top of the knoll. Serafina follows beside Mira and me, while another servant trudges alongside Dary, carrying only a bottle of mead. Dary holds the picnic baskets the servants were *meant* to carry. I want to make a joke that he's trying to impress the fair-haired girl beside him, but in truth, that's just how Dary is.

He's very different than most of the royals I've met. While he *is* cocky and a tad bit arrogant at times, those aren't the core parts of his personality. He's kind and understanding; he's a genuinely *good* person and friend. I'm lucky it was Dary I was meant to marry and not some other prince. Not everyone would have been so understanding or considerate of my situation. Some would have even used it as a means of manipulation, a way to make me do what they want.

I've been blessed in this life. I'm not sure what I did in any past lives to warrant such fair treatment, but I'm glad for the Gods' favor.

Serafina runs ahead of us, spreading a blanket out on the ground before Dary sets the baskets down. The fair-haired girl—I don't know her name—smiles at each of us shyly before handing the prince the mead.

"Thank you, Danielle," he purrs.

Mira rolls her eyes and I chuckle as I smooth my dress behind my legs and take a seat on the blanket. Mira leans casually on her side, reaching for the basket as the girls curtsy to us before scampering off.

“Danielle, is it?” Mira asks as she pops a piece of cheese into her mouth.

“It is,” Dary answers, his cheeks flushing. “Don’t start.”

“I didn’t know you had a thing for the serving girls,” Mira goads him, then her eyes fall to me. “You two are so much alike.”

“We are *not*,” I groan, reaching for the bottle of ale. I take a long swig before setting it down again and untie my hair as I chastise Mira for her slander. “I do not have a *thing* for serving girls.”

“No,” Dary agrees in a stern voice. “She has a thing for what she can’t have.”

“Don’t we all,” Mira sighs wistfully.

I scoff, tossing a piece of fruit at him before grabbing another. We used to do this a lot, as children. Dary, Mira, and I would come out to the knolls that surround the castle and play for hours. Nanny would have to chase us indoors, most days.

Nothing beats laying in the grass, laughing at the sky.

Mira blows a dandelion as Dary rambles on about this Danielle of his. “I can’t pursue her, obviously. But she was flirting, what’s the harm in showing interest?”

“Oh, I can think of a few things,” I laugh. “I say have your fun while you can, Dary. One day you’ll be married, then you’ll wish you knew what the serving girl from your youth tasted like so you can dream about it when you’re old and gray.”

“That’s—” Mira chokes out. “I’m not sure if it’s poetic or disgusting. Who are you and where is Taryn?”

“I’m just saying,” I laugh, pulling my feet under my bottom as I take another sip of the mead. “We live strange lives. Our duties prevent us from following our hearts sometimes. I may have to wed someday. Even though Dary spared me and my father seems to understand I’m a sapphic, eventually, I’ll have to provide an heir. I plan to live my life the way I want to until that moment comes.”

Mira’s face softens and she reaches out, rubbing her hand down my arm. “You don’t think he’ll ever remarry?”

“I pray for it, but no. I don’t think he will ever get over my mother’s memory. Her loss haunts him. I pray for him to find a lovely woman to marry and have a family with, as much for selfish reasons as wanting my father happy. I just don’t think he will ever be far enough past his grief to

accomplish that. At least, not until it's too late." Father is getting older. Eventually, another heir won't be an option.

"My mother said there's going to be a wedding lottery at the jubilee this year," Mira whispers, excitement tinging her words as she changes the subject to something happier.

"Oh?" Dary asks, his eyebrow hiking up his forehead.

"I'm to be in it," she squeals, clapping her hands together.

"I'm not sure why you're in such a rush to be married," I snicker, laying back with my head on the blanket.

"I *want* children, Taryn. Maybe you don't understand because you prefer the lady maids, but—"

"Mira!" I snort.

"I do, though," she continues. "I want a family so badly I can't stand it. I always have. When I was a little girl, I played with my dollies and treated them just like a little newborn babe. I pretended to nurse them and everything, it was ridiculous. The want never left me, though."

"I'm happy for you," I laugh. "Truly, I am."

"What will you do?" she asks, circling back to the original conversation.

"King Godfrey supports you and your preferences, Taryn," Dary interjects. "We all do. Hell, I think most of the kingdom has come to accept you for who you are. But the issue of an heir will always be an issue unless your father takes a new queen."

I shrug my shoulder, staring up at the blue sky. Small white clouds pass over us like little puffs of cotton spread out to break up the never-ending blue. "Who do you think will enter the lottery?" I ask Mira, avoiding my own problems as usual.

"Well, no royals, for certain," she murmurs, and I find myself wondering why she'd think it necessary to say such a thing. Mira's family has been merchants for generations. Only when her grandfather secured a trade route through the eastern mountains that made trading with Tabistak easier, did their family get awarded a title. "But I think that knight might enter," she gushes. "The pretty one with the curly hair. Edin seemed to think we'd make a good match."

"What knight is this?" Dary asks. I'm not sure how he tolerates our prattle, but he always has.

"Callum," I laugh. "He is pretty, isn't he?"

“He was gutted you’re a sapphic,” she drawls out slowly. I can’t see her face, but I know she’s rolling her eyes. “As always, Taryn draws the most attention.”

“I do not,” I chuckle, rolling onto my side to look at them. “People want what they can’t have.”

“Yes, they do,” Dary sighs, biting into an apple.

“I think, whoever enters, I’ll be happy. My parents wouldn’t marry me to someone who’s unkind or improper.”

“That’s true. They adore you and I love it.” I’ve never met someone so spoiled as Mira in all my life and that’s saying something, coming from a princess. “Your father dotes on you. He will make sure the man who ‘wins’ is someone who will do the same, I’m sure.” I swallow the smile spreading across my face and rest my head on my hand, looking at them both in turn. “I think you and Dary should wed.”

Silence falls across our little picnic and I sink my teeth into the side of my cheek to keep from laughing out loud. The panic on Mira’s face is priceless and the utter confusion on Dary’s amuses me to no end. I have my suspicions, and they’re only suspicions, but this little game is fun.

“What?” Dary asks, his eyebrows shooting up into his hairline.

“No, no, no,” Mira laughs, shaking her head as she dismisses the thought. “I think we’ll save Dary for you, just in case you need an understanding husband to produce heirs and leave you alone, otherwise.”

“I’m not a breeding stud,” he scoffs, flipping his long hair over his shoulder. “I do have feelings, you know.”

“Oh, we know,” Mira laughs. I narrow my eyes on her, wondering what she means, precisely. Dary doesn’t have feelings for the serving girl, he hasn’t known her long enough. As my gaze slides to the scandalized man opposite the blanket, I roll my eyes.

In truth, it was something we’d discussed before we called our engagement off all those years ago. Before we went to our parents and told them we didn’t think we should wed, Dary had made me a promise. If our parents refused to dissolve the agreement, we would wed and live our own private lives as much as we could. It wasn’t ideal—and thank the Gods it hadn’t come to that—but it was very much a reality we’d already faced.

“I can’t wait to see Callum compete in the tournament—”

The ringing of the bells sounds across the hills and my nose wrinkles as I sit up, looking at my two friends curiously. “Haven’t all the royals

arrived, already?”

“Yes, the last of them arrived last night,” Mira answers quickly, rushing to her feet.

I follow her to the edge of the knoll with Dary at our side as we peer down at the road. “The jubilee begins tomorrow,” I mutter, curious who would interrupt such an important celebration. The bells wouldn’t ring for just *any* noble.

“Is that a snake on the banner?” Mira gasps.

I squint my eyes trying to see clearly. She’s right. On each of the banners, a green and gold snake winds around a sword. “Is Izvora coming to the jubilee?”

“They never signed the accords,” Dary growls. I look to my left to find him scowling down at the party as it approaches the castle. “Is it an attack?”

“There’s no formation, Dary. It’s not an attack.” I look down on the horses with curiosity as they prance toward the castle, noting there is no royal carriage. Instead, two people ride side by side at the front of the procession, both faces hidden by helmets.

“Of course,” he mutters, hurrying to roll up the blanket and fetch the baskets. “Come on, they’re not part of the accords de paix. They never signed. If they’re here peacefully, it’s history in the making and you won’t want to miss it, ladies.”

Mira giggles beside me and I smile, shaking my head before casting one last look down at the waving banners. Izvora has come to Vanir for the jubilee. What a strange and amazing thing to happen.

They’ve isolated themselves for generations—for as long as anyone can remember, really. I wonder what’s changed?

Still, if they’ve come to sign the accords de paix, it’s a monumental occasion. My father—and the rest of the royals—will be beside themselves to make an ally of the northern kingdom. The possibilities for trade, the cultural exchange . . . it’s all very exciting.

And *meeting* the northern kingdom! I shake my head with a smile and follow my friends back toward the castle. I hope Izvora comes with good news.



AS WE BURST THROUGH THE COURTYARD, I FIND ONA AND MY FATHER waiting at the bottom of the steps, looks of surprise scrawled across both their faces.

“Izvora is here,” I rush out, coming to stand by my father’s side.

“So, I’ve heard,” he murmurs, stroking his long white beard. “It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“It’s a blessing,” Ona smiles. “Izvora has never signed the accords or joined the fellowship the rest of Lazoreat enjoys. The Gods are smiling on us today.” Her bright eyes twinkle and for a moment, I think she actually looks *happy* for once. It’s a strange sight. I’m so used to the mage being the picture of grace and cool demeanor. It looks good on her, I have to admit.

“*If* that’s why they’re here,” my father sighs, shaking his head. “I’ve never met this king. I received a letter from him once, many years ago, saying some of our knights were passing through Izvora land as they escorted a merchant to the northern sea. I responded, letting him know I’d be sure to have them avoid that trail in the future, but he never wrote back. They’re a strange people, I think.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge, Father,” I chuckle, excitement bubbling in my chest as my eyes dart around the courtyard. Dary stands with his mother and father and Mira makes her way to my side.

Two large horses stride into the courtyard at the same time, each mounted by someone completely clad in full armor. The horse to my left holds who I can only assume to be the queen. The chainmail hugging her body makes it obvious that there’s a woman tucked inside that armor. On the right, a much larger figure sits atop his horse—the king.

“Izovra,” Father calls out cheerfully, no sign of the hesitation he mentioned only moments ago. “Welcome to Vanir.”

The man on the right pulls the helmet from his head, long blonde hair falling around his face as he shakes it loose from the metal. “Thank you,” he murmurs, surveying the crowd as the woman to the left repeats the process.

She’s beautiful, I realize, as her long golden blonde hair tumbles down her back while she tucks her helmet into her saddle. Her sharp gaze looks around the courtyard and I wonder what sort of warrior queens the north has hidden for all these generations. The woman is *fierce*.

“What brings you to Vanir during the jubilee?” Father asks, motioning some hesitant servants to move forward and take care of the Izvoras’ horses. The king slips down from his mount and while I expect him to hold out a hand for his wife, she dismounts completely on her own, her hair falling around her face as she fiddles with the saddlebags of her horse.

My eyebrow arches as I watch the strange display. *The northerners have strange etiquette . . .*

“I’d like to speak with you privately about that,” the king murmurs.

My gaze falls to my father as his shoulders square. “Of course,” he murmurs, gesturing behind him to the castle. “I thought we’d have more of an introduction, but please, follow me.”

The king bows his head respectfully as he passes us. His wife follows behind him, her long hair swaying as she walks up the steps. Her gaze falters on me for a moment, our eyes meeting before she cants her head to the side in some strange bow. I nod my own head, even as my brows crease at the strange behavior the northerners seem to possess.

“They didn’t even state their names,” Mira murmurs as we watch Ona follow them all inside.

“It’s strange, indeed,” I agree. “Different customs, though. They’ve been isolated from the rest of Lazoreat for quite some time, perhaps this is just normal for them?” I shrug my shoulders, moving up the stairs to follow them toward my father’s study.

Mira lags behind, and I can hear her chattering to Dary about the strange manners of our northern visitors as I make my way down the hall. When I reach the door, I find my father standing just inside, his hand on the handle as his eyes meet mine.

The look on his face says it all, he doesn’t have to tell me he’s sending me away. Though, I am shocked that he would. I raise my chin over his shoulder, staring at the backs of the Izvoras as they speak with Ona. Her eyes meet mine and a wicked smile curves her lips.

Anger . . . or jealousy maybe . . . curdles in my stomach and I shake my head, turning on my heel. A quiet huff sounds behind me and I know my father feels bad for not including me. But the king did say he wanted a ‘private’ meeting. I roll my eyes as I make my way down the hall, toward the eastern wing. The knots in my stomach don’t make sense. I’m no jealous child. I know diplomacy with the northerners isn’t something we

can pass up, and we can't risk it for the sake of my personal feelings either.

Still. It stings.

CHAPTER THREE



Ona

My fingers clasp together at my waist as I smile at the northern king and his sister. “I am Ona DiAllo, the king’s mage here in Vanir.”

“It’s an honor,” King Aeron murmurs, nodding his head politely. “We have no mage in Izvora, so meeting someone with your talents is quite the treat for us.”

“Yes, it is,” Lady Anna agrees.

My cheeks warm under their praise. Many, many rumors have spread over the years about Izvora, about why they are so isolated from the rest of Lazoreat, about what secrets they must be keeping.

Some have claimed they were ruled by a troll king. Other rumors stated that Izvora is the last foothold of the elves—that’s the one I’ve always leaned toward, personally. The elves had to have gone somewhere and what better hiding place is there than a kingdom with no contact with the rest of the continent?

Godfrey closes the door softly and comes to sit at his desk. I remain standing at his side, waiting for one of the royals to speak. Whenever two kings are in a room together it’s like waiting for an *explosion*.

That explosion can be fireworks or it can be mortar shells, depending entirely on how the two egos clash. Kings are funny things like that, I’ve found over the years. I’ve served many.

Ona DiAllo isn't the *first* name I've been known by, after all.

"What did you want to speak with me about that demanded such privacy?" Godfrey asks, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk.

"Thank you for meeting with us privately. I know it's a strange request, but I appreciate you accommodating me. It has been a strange journey to this place in time where Izvora is considering joining the accords de paix. I wanted to discuss the details of the accords, or read them, if that's possible."

"Oh?" Godfrey asks, his voice going up as he waves to the wall behind him. "They're hanging right there. They'll be on display for the jubilee tomorrow, but they are always right here, each signature preserved over the generations."

King Aeron rises and makes his way to the parchment hanging carefully on the wall. As he brushes against me, a zing of energy flares through my middle.

Magic.

My eyes go wide as I glance from the king to his sister. They said they had no mages in Izvora . . . perhaps because they have no need of one. I've never heard of a sorcerer ruling a kingdom. The royal bloodlines of Lazoreat hold no magic, as far as I'm aware.

How . . .

"Is something wrong, mage?" Lady Anna asks, drawing my gaze back to her.

I shake my head, pursing my lips together as I take a step away from the northern king. It wasn't just magic I felt, but *strong* magic. Old magic. The kind of magic that can be dangerous, and despite my curiosity about this strange kingdom, my first duty is to *my* king.

"My king?" I murmur quietly.

"Yes, Ona?"

"I'm going to fetch a guard to bring us refreshments while you and our guests discuss these matters. I'm sure the Izvoras are parched after such a long journey." As Godfrey's eyes meet mine, they soften, and he nods. Of course, he nods. He's such a kind king, of course he would put their needs above any perceived impropriety.

"That's very thoughtful," he agrees. "Please forgive me for not thinking of it myself," he chuckles to the Izvoras as I step away to the

door. “This introduction has been rather peculiar, and I think it’s robbed me of my manners.”

“Nonsense,” Anna laughs, the sound sweet and grating on my ears.

I pop open the door and motion to the guard across the hall to come over. “Send for some wine and something light to eat. Bring it in personally,” I emphasize the last words, waiting for him to nod as he acknowledges the double meaning.

It’s a guard’s duty to know when their presence is needed and when it isn’t. Right now, it is. At least, in my opinion. The guard nods his head and I step away from the door, leaving it cracked open.

Something about the magic in that king has my nerves on edge. I can’t expose him, not without creating an incident, and of course, I have no proof. And having magic isn’t illegal in Lazoreat, even if it was in my homeland. I straighten my spine, taking my place beside the king once again.

“Yes, Ona, could you give us some more light, please?”

“Certainly,” I murmur, holding out my hand. I summon an orb of light to hover above the accords and wait patiently as the two kings read over them together, murmuring to one another.

“Fantastic,” Godfrey laughs with delight, turning around. He grabs a quill from his desk and dips it in ink before handing it to Aeron. “You’ll be the first Izvora to ever sign. It’s a wonderful occasion, isn’t it?”

“It is,” King Aeron agrees, but he doesn’t reach for the quill immediately. “And there will be no interference in my kingdom?”

“None whatsoever. You can continue on as you have, but some level of cooperation for trade is usually expected, but not required. All you are doing is agreeing to the peace that the entirety of Lazoreat has enjoyed for generations.”

Aeron nods, grasping the quill between his fingers before he scrawls his signature across the bottom of the document, in a blank space originally intended for Izvora.

A shiver curves my spine and I pray to all the Gods—the old ones that have no names anymore and the new ones that are worshipped openly—that my feeling about these royals is wrong. I pray they mean my king no harm. But something tells me, they are much, much more than what they seem.

CHAPTER FOUR



Niressa

I rake my fingers through my hair, avoiding eye contact with the local humans as I wander through the market. I've been coming to this market for decades, ever since they erected it at the foot of the mountains. It was a brilliant place to host a market, truly. Any travelers who cross the mountains from Belvedere would meet this market, first.

They have an inn, a tavern, and every sort of shop that the weary traveler never knew they needed to peruse before they make their way to Vanir.

It is the perfect little travelers' trap.

I chuckle to myself as yet another human beckons me to his stall, waving something shiny in my direction. I turn toward him, unable to ignore the glint of light reflecting off the metal and pause, waiting for his spiel.

"Hello, miss," he rushes out. "Have you ever seen a dragon's egg before?"

My eyebrow arches and I shake my head. "No. I've not seen a dragon's egg, have you?" I clasp my hands in front of my waist, waiting to hear whatever magnificent story he's selling to accompany that beautiful piece of metal. It's egg-shaped, certainly. It's gilded and beautiful and everything I'd love to have tucked away in my nest. But it's not a dragon's egg.

Because we don't lay eggs. Dragons give birth in their human forms, the same way humans do, with live little wriggling newborns who cry far too often.

"Well, you have now," he assures me, gesturing to the beautiful decoration.

"And is there's a baby dragon in that egg?" I ask, tilting my head to the side as I study the trinket.

"Why, of course not. This one was never fertilized."

"Mmm," I murmur, holding out my hand. The sweaty man narrows his eyes on me before placing the prize in my palm. It's light, hollow. I can understand how he might be able to trick a human into thinking it was an egg. "And how much coin do you want for this unfertilized egg of yours?"

"Fifty gilders," he murmurs quickly, his beady black eyes shining with excitement.

"Fifty? No." I set the egg down carefully on the wooden bar that separates the public from his wares and start to turn around.

"Wait! What about thirty?"

"Thirty gilders for an empty egg? I don't think so," I laugh as I browse the stands outside his stall. Blankets and tapestries drape carefully over metal stands, displaying their beautiful patterns.

"Thirty gilders and I'll throw in one of those tapestries," he says smoothly as my fingers glide across the embroidery of one.

"Hmm," I muse aloud as I trace the pattern down the tapestry. It shows a horned lion roaring from atop a hill as a storm rages in the background. I quite like it.

"Twenty-five," I sigh, already pulling the tapestry from the rack.

"Thirty."

"Twenty," I laugh, shrugging as I lay the tapestry down on the wooden counter with a grin.

"Blast," he mutters, grabbing a sack to place my items in. I purse my lips against my amusement as he neatly tucks the egg into the bag atop the folded tapestry. Without hesitation, I lay down twenty gilders and turn around, intent on exploring the rest of the market.

The wares are different every time I come here. I stop at a stall selling food and purchase some chicken on a stick. It's flavored with some sweet glaze that sets my mouth watering as I make my way through the rest of the market.

By the time I leave, I've purchased four bags full of things I absolutely do not need. But I want them, and I have the gold to purchase them, so why not indulge a little? I hurry past a group of men wearing chainmail—knights or sellswords, either way, I want nothing to do with them. They're trouble for my kind; they always have been and I want no part in whatever nonsense they're up to.

I've lived alone, away from my own kind for quite a while now. If I can avoid their idiocy, I can avoid the same from the humans. I cast my eyes downward as I pass them. I don't want them looking too closely at the color they'll find there if they pay too close attention.

Dragon eyes are a subtle thing when we're in human form. The eye changes to a human shape, but the color remains the same. That's not so bad for dragons with blue or green coloring, those eyes are normal enough amongst humans. But when your eyes are a rosy pink, that can bring up questions.

No one stops me or asks questions as I leave the market. I walk gingerly down the road, carrying my sacks as the wind blows through my hair. It's a beautiful day on the outskirts of Vanir. Only happy white clouds fill the sky. In the distance, I can see dragonkin flying around the mountains, enjoying the cheerful weather.

When a cart passes me by, I smile up at the driver. She waves at me before carrying on toward the market, off to sell whatever wares she packed. I glance over my shoulder when she disappears down the hill and turn off into the forest that grows at the foot of the mountain. My mountain isn't very far from here, at least not by air. It was my parents' and I've kept it for all these years. Being away from my nest for too long makes me nervous. Dragons have tried to take it before and—undoubtedly—one will try again, someday.

"Fuck," I mutter as I search for a space between the trees large enough to shift. I know there is one, I changed here just this morning. I push a low hanging branch out of my way and march forward, searching for the little clearing I usually use.

My nostrils flare and I follow the scent of wildflowers deeper into the woods until the tree trunks finally open up before me. "Ah," I sigh as I step into the clearing. I drop the bags and pull the loose dress over my head, tucking it into one of the bags of new clothing. My neck rolls as scales burst from my skin, covering me as my body grows and elongates. I

twist my neck around, looking over my back as my tail swipes back and forth through the air. My pink scales give way to teal ones, highlights that catch my own eye.

Vain, I accuse myself silently.

I grip the sacks in my claws and beat my wings, taking off into the sky. Within moments, clouds part around me, and I soar toward my nest, passing over a few mountains before I reach my own. The sheer cliff face is my favorite part about the nest I grew up in. I can see the cave from here, opening up into nothing. There's a rear entrance that leads out to the other side of the mountain, of course, but I much prefer this one.

It's the perfect landing spot and offers much more light than some of the nests I visited as a youngling. My claws slide across the stone landing while I tuck my wings to my back. The bags skid across the floor unceremoniously and I snort.

"That blasted egg best not be broken," I mutter to myself as I make my way further into the cavern. I shake my head, trying to clear the scent of humans from my snout. They're smelly little things; all their perfumes and profuse sweating tend to give me a headache.

When I snort a little fire and the scent persists . . . I know I'm not smelling the humans from the market. My eyes narrow as I look around the cavern, wondering where they are. I know they can't leave this way. But the fact that there are *humans* in my nest sets the fire in my chest ablaze. I lower my snout, trying not to let them know I've detected their presence.

At least I didn't change as soon as I landed, I groan internally. That would be a bloody nightmare to deal with. I'd have to kill each and every one of them. Though, I may anyway. By the smell of it, there's quite a few hiding here in my caverns. I find the bags that slid away from me upon my landing and quickly tuck them into a pile of treasures. A yell sounds to my right and I whip my head in that direction, baring my teeth as my tail whips back and forth.

An armored knight rushes toward me, sword raised. At his back, several men in leather armor fan out, circling around me. I lash out with my tail, swiping several over the edge and out into the chasm below my nest. Their screams turn my lips up into a smile as I blow a line of fire toward the remaining men. The scent of burnt flesh fills the air, coating everything around me.

“You’d enter my nest and try to steal from *me*?” I roar, spewing more fire at them. The knight shields himself while the others lunge around the flames, stabbing at me with their weapons. These fools clearly know nothing about dragons. They’re no where near my weakness. My wings flare out as I rain more fire down on the poor fools. One lunges directly toward my snout.

My jaws close around his middle, the sound of bones crunching filling my body before I toss the dead man on the ground, snarling at the remaining humans. Two lay dying in the floor, their skin burned beyond repair. One holds his weapon in front of him, regret flashing in his eyes before it turns to something else.

Something far more idiotic.

He rushes toward me and I shake my head side to side, roaring. “So eager to die.”

The flames that coat him are the hottest I can summon. I watch with pity as his skin melts and his bones fall to the stone floor. I scan the room to see if I’ve missed any of them and take a step forward. With the flick of a claw, I put the remaining two soldiers out of their misery. It’s a kindness, one they’d appreciate if they could speak.

No one deserves to die slowly.

Several bodies litter the floor of my home, but there’s one missing. I don’t see the shiny knight’s armor anywhere. My eyes narrow as I move toward the tunnel leading further into the mountain, his escape route. I don’t see him.

I growl my displeasure but turn around, inspecting my hoard. Everything seems to be where I left it. I quickly shift into my human form, my bare feet moving over the cold stone floor quickly to look in my favored pile. The sword of the first knight who tried to slay me. The shield of a king who tried to enslave my father. The ransom my mother was paid for returning a princess. All of it is there and accounted for, except for one piece.

The piece that means the most to me.

I dig through the pile of gold searching for the crown, praying it was simply displaced during the small battle. I run from pile to pile, searching for it amongst all my treasures. It’s nowhere to be found.

My favorite treasure is missing.

A crown.

A crown I took from a dead woman.

A crown that looks like it was made *for* me. I stomp to the ledge and roar my rage, fire pouring from my mouth. My blood boils with fresh anger, all the adrenaline of the battle pushing me on, encouraging the bloodlust seething beneath my skin. The teal rose on that crown means more to me than the knight could possibly know.

And I will get it back.

CHAPTER FIVE



“**W**hat happened in the meeting with Izvora?” Mira asks as we round a corner, heading toward the main hall.

“It would seem they’ve come to sign the accords de paix,” I shrug. “I wasn’t permitted in the room when they discussed it.” That still bothers me, actually. My father has never denied me entrance to his meetings before now. He has always stressed the importance of my learning the way our kingdom works, so when the time comes for me to rule, I’ll be as prepared as I can be.

“That’s strange, isn’t it?” Mira murmurs, smiling at a group of nobles as we pass them.

“Which part?”

“All of it, really,” she laughs. “Are you alright?”

“I’m annoyed,” I admit quietly. “I’m not used to being shut out.”

Mira nods, looping her arm through mine as we make our way through the castle. “But I suppose it’s good news for Lazoreat though, isn’t it? There’s no such thing as too much peace.”

“That’s true. Has your father ever spoken of them? During his travels, has he ever been to Izvora?”

“No. And they’ve never been to anyone’s court, that I know of. At least, not since people have been tracking such things. They’re a mystery to us all, I think.” I glance to the side to find Mira’s eyes sparkling with interest as she talks about the strange northern kingdom. “It’s exciting to think we get to meet them.”

“It’s an interesting turn of events,” I sigh, forcing a smile onto my face as we come to the great hall. Dary leans against a table, a mug in hand as he speaks with a group of men. A few knights litter their little group, but mostly it’s comprised of nobles, no doubt vying for the prince’s favor.

“Ladies!” Dary calls out, setting his mug down as he waves us over. I roll my eyes but can’t help the smile that spreads across my face as we walk over. “Welcome.”

“Are you welcoming me in my own home, Dary?” I laugh, cocking my hand on my hip.

“Hello, Sir Callum,” Mira purrs.

“Hello, Lady Mira,” he replies, holding her gaze even while I torture Dary with his impropriety.

“If the foreign prince is being a bother, princess, I’d be glad to dispatch him,” Sir Edin chuckles from his seat at the table.

“Do you think you could?” Dary asks, turning to face his old friend.

“Most definitely, boy. I remember when you could barely hold that sword your father gave you.”

“That was a long time ago, Edin,” he snorts. “I’m sure I could at least hold my own with the likes of you.”

I shake my head at their friendly banter before making my way away from the table. It doesn’t take long for Dary and Mira to find me by the display. The accords stretch across a wooden placard pinned where everyone can read them clearly.

I swear my kingdom’s fealty to all inhabitants of Lazoreat. No man, woman, king, or queen shall interfere with the peace and prosperity that is the right of all born to life.

Signature after signature scrawl across the bottom of the document. Each one represents a king or queen who agreed to uphold the core tenants of this agreement. And, for the most part, the accords have been effective. There has been no true war in Lazoreat in generations. Small skirmishes have broken out between kingdoms over petty things like land and crops, but the other kingdoms force them to settle the disputes quickly and quietly.

There has been no true *war* since the accords were signed. No death en masse to haunt the people who live outside the safety of the castle walls.

“Are you being sentimental?” Dary asks, breaking my trance as I scan the words of the document again.

“Nostalgic, perhaps,” I laugh, turning to face my two friends with a smile in place. “Are you excited for the tournament?”

“I can’t wait,” Mira rushes out. Her hair is rolled into expert buns on either side of her head with flowers peeking through her red locks.

“We know what you can’t wait for,” Dary snickers.

“Callum,” Mira sighs wistfully and I shake my head.

“What are you going to do if he loses?” My hand brushes against the hollow of my throat as I watch her process my question. Her brow creases as she considers the idea of him losing, most likely for the first time since she started fantasizing about him being in the tournament.

“I’ll just have to nurse him back to health,” she finally answers with a smirk. “It’s such a chore, but we can’t be selfish when our countrymen need us.”

“Our country—” I choke on the words, trying to imagine Mira playing nurse. “You’d end up killing the poor man before it was over. Accidentally, for sure, but he’d be just as dead, nonetheless.”

“Taryn!” she gasps, swatting my arm playfully. “I’m not some imbecile.”

My mouth swishes to the side. Mira wouldn’t know how to stitch a wound to save her life and if she had to try, her patient would probably bleed out before she ever managed to stomach the gore.

Before I can word my response in a mostly kind manner, however, my father enters the room. His blue eyes meet mine as he ignores the mage prattling at his side. He swipes a hand down his white beard and rolls his eyes.

“I have an uneasy feeling about Izvora, Your Majesty. They are—”

“Stop, stop,” he hisses, turning to face her directly. “They’ve done nothing. You will not spoil the jubilee with superstitions. Should they do something, bring me proof, Ona. Until then, you will behave as if you have some sense of decorum.” The power cracking in his words makes even my spine stiffen. Father doesn’t usually throw his weight around, even as a king. He’s always said it’s a sign of weakness when you must remind someone of your superiority.

If you were truly superior, they’d know already.

“Even the mage is wary of their presence,” Dary whispers quietly as my father makes his way toward us.

“That does seem foreboding, doesn’t it?”

Dary runs his fingers through his long hair and sighs. Mira curtsies as my father approaches.

“Please, Mira, you know that’s not necessary,” he laughs, signaling for her to rise. “Taryn, my love,” he croons, reaching out to hug me.

I throw my arms around his neck and let him hold me for a moment. I’ve been annoyed at being shut out from the meeting with Izvora, but he seems back to himself, today.

“Forgive an old man for giving into peer pressure?”

“Peer pressure?” I ask, laughing. “Who would pressure the king?”

“Another king, of course,” he winks. “Don’t be upset with me. I promise to include you in any other meetings we have. Izvora is a . . . shy kingdom, it would seem. I didn’t want to run them off by insisting on your presence.”

“It’s alright, Father,” I smile. “I understand.” I step away from his hug and shove Dary’s arm. “Your ex-future-son-in-law has concerns about their presence. You should ease his mind.”

Dary huffs, muttering under his breath. “Traitor.”

The sound of many footsteps fills the room. Several of the royals from visiting kingdoms make their way into the great hall, mingling with nobles and merchants as we all wait to head to the tournament.

“Why don’t I let you decide for yourselves?” Father asks, stroking his beard. I follow his line of sight and my eyes land on two of the blondest people I’ve ever seen. Everyone else is dressed casually, in dresses and trousers, but the king and queen of Izvora instead wear what looks like . . . casual armor?

“Are they worried they’ll be attacked? In the great hall?” I snicker, covering my mouth as my father waves them over. The king nods his head before he and his wife head toward us.

“Be *kind*, Taryn,” Father whispers. The smile on his face gives away his amusement though; he knows I have a point. “Aeron!” he calls out in a booming voice, clapping the other man on the shoulder. “Please, let me introduce my daughter, Princess Taryn of Vanir. Taryn, love, this is King Aeron of Izvora.”

I bow my head as I curtsy before the king and his wife. When I rise again, I meet her eyes and incline my head again. Decorum doesn’t dictate I do so, but it’s a show of respect amongst female rulers, to be given their own private acknowledgement amongst everyone fawning over the kings.

“It’s an honor to meet you, princess. Please,” he murmurs, reaching for my hand. He brings my knuckles to his lips, brushing them across the skin there for the briefest of moments before dropping my hand with a smile. “This is my sister, Lady Anna of Izvora.”

His sister? I thought for sure she was his wife, as they’re dressed so similarly. Though now that he’s said it, the matching hair and similar features . . . they are clearly related.

“My lady,” I murmur the words expected of me but confusion creases my brows. It doesn’t make sense that Anna is a lady and not a princess. Though it’s possible the culture in the north is so isolated they’ve developed customs entirely different . . . a king’s siblings are princes and princesses. Their title doesn’t change just because their eldest sibling ascends the throne . . .

“It’s a pleasure to meet a princess so beautiful,” Anna murmurs, her lips cocked into a lopsided smile. Her blonde hair and blazing brown eyes are a wonderful combination. They’re not even brown—no, they’re *golden*. There are far too many specks of gold floating around those eyes to call them brown.

“And this is Prince Dary of Tabistak,” Father laughs, interrupting my awkward eye contact with the Izvora woman. “And Lady Mira.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Aeron smiles, nodding respectfully to each of them.

“Come,” Father announces in a booming voice as he turns to the rest of the room. “Let the jubilee de paix begin!” A roar goes up through the room as people make their way to the exit. Aeron and Anna stay close to us, surveying the crowd with wary eyes as we move toward the arena that’s been erected outside.

I take my seat in the same place I do every year. Mira sits on my left, between Dary and I. This year, however, Anna of Izvora takes a seat on my right. I glance at her with a smile before returning to Mira’s endless chatter.

“Callum will win, I know it.”

“He’s going to get his ass handed to him,” Dary laughs.

“Why would you wish such a thing?” Mira snaps, glowering at our friend. “Crude.”

I shake my head, trying not to laugh at their bickering as the men begin the melee. In the middle of the arena, they all make a mad a mad dash for weapons—all wooden, of course.

As the first sounds of battle fill the clearing, Anna scoffs beside me, “This is how you celebrate peace? With mock war?”

“Well,” I laugh, studying her curiously. “Men do need to boast about their ferocity. This is a much better outlet than an actual battle, don’t you think?”

Anna’s lip curls in disgust and it confuses me. Izvora is known for their dragon hunting, something no other kingdom has participated in in ages. She wears armor and even carries a small short sword at her waist. Why a spectacle such as this would bother her makes no sense to me.

“If they want to prove themselves, they should do so with blood and steel,” she mutters before meeting my eyes. Again, I’m struck by the bright shade. The light catches on the gold in her eyes and she looks away, smirking. “Did you like what you see, princess?”

“I’m sorry?” I ask, shocked by how bold she’s being. Apparently, I’m not the only one to notice, judging by the silence that replaces Dary and Mira’s incessant arguing.

Anna leans forward and something about her eyes change. Her lips curve in a wicked smile and my heart rate skyrockets—not from arousal, though I’m sure that was her intent, but from fear. Something about that smile is unsettling. “Do you like what you see, Princess Taryn?”

“You’re lovely, of course,” I murmur quickly before looking away. I’ve never had another woman be so forward with me but I’m not convinced that’s what is putting me off the encounter. Usually, I’d give my left hand for sapphics to be bolder around me. There’s always this weird period of guessing, where I try to judge if they’re a sapphic or interested in me; it’s tiring. Anna is obviously open to a woman’s company, but something about her . . .

“Well done!” Dary shouts, clapping his hands together. My eyes fly to the spectacle in the middle of the arena. Callum stands victorious, a wooden sword pointed at Edin’s throat where he lays on the ground.

“Ah! Well done, Sir Callum!” Mira cries out, joining in the applause. Soon, everyone watching claps and Callum reaches down, helping his friend to his feet.

“Well,” I whisper to Mira as I turn my body completely away from Anna. “It seems your man won the tournament.”

“Hopefully he wins the lottery, too,” Mira sighs, her eyes wide with adoration.

“Do you think he’ll enter?” Dary asks Mira, even though his eyes ask me a different question. I know he noticed the strange exchange with Anna. I don’t know what to say, not with her sitting so close by. Luckily, he doesn’t ask anything out loud.

“One can only hope,” Mira murmurs, smiling at the victor.

A warm hand falls on my bare shoulder, the part exposed by my dress and I startle. It’s far too warm—hot even. My head snaps toward Anna and she grins at me, bowing her head before rising from her seat.

“Thank you for sharing your time with me, princess.”

“You’re very welcome, Lady Anna,” I return, studying her hands. Why is she so warm? It’s like she dunked her hands in hot bath water, then touched me. But I know that’s not the case. My head tilts to the side as I watch the strange woman make her way through the crowd.

“And what do we make of that?” Mira asks as she, too, rises from her seat. I shake my head as I smooth my dress down and shrug.

“I’m not entirely sure,” I whisper, turning to look at them both. “You should go congratulate your *friend* on his victory, Mira.”

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Dary murmurs in awe. I meet his gaze and nod, answering carefully.

“She is. Strange, though, I think.”

Dary shook his head as if clearing it and offered Mira his hand, leading her down to the arena to congratulate Callum. My fingers traced the heat still burning against my flesh and I shook my head.

Strange, indeed.

CHAPTER SIX



Music fills the ballroom and several couples take advantage in the middle of the room, swaying each other around to the tune of the strings. I glance around the crowd, taking in all the familiar faces. I've known most of these people in one way or another since I was a child. A few knights—though they aren't dressed as knights in Vanir or the other kingdoms dress—I don't recognize move freely through the crowd. They're from Izvora. They wear the same strange armored formal wear as their king and Lady Anna.

The music stops and my eyes instantly rivet to the area where the musicians stand, holding their instruments to the side as Lord Sheffield clears his throat.

"Thank you," he says to the musicians. They bow their heads gracefully. "It is my great pleasure to announce, with the king's blessing, a wedding lottery at this year's jubilee de paix."

Beside me, Mira thrums with excitement. I take a sip of the drink I've been holding, waiting for Lord Sheffield to continue.

"My daughter, Lady Mira," he gestures to where she stands and I turn—along with everyone else—to look at her fully as her father announces her availability to the room. "She is a lovely young lady and we couldn't be prouder of her. Should any *suitable* bachelors like to place their name, please notify myself or my wife. Thank you."

A round of applause goes up and I join in, clapping my hands carefully around the glass I hold. Mira curtsies, bowing her head to everyone in

attendance before the music starts again.

“Ohhh, do you think anyone decent will enter?”

“Of course, they will, Mira. I’m sure the lottery will be a smashing success.” Dary squeezes her hand and I nod my agreement.

“Your father won’t let anyone you wouldn’t approve of even enter the lottery, I’m sure of it,” I laugh. Several young noblemen nod their head in Mira’s direction, and she flushes under their attention. “Oh, come now. It’s way past time to be shy, love,” I snicker.

“Don’t tease me,” she whispers, pressing her hands to her cheeks. “I’m blushing brighter than a bloody apple, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” Dary and I answer in unison.

“Taryn,” Dary murmurs while Mira fumes quietly about her blushing cheeks betraying her. “Is Anna of Izvora single? Has she mentioned being promised to anyone? She’s quite beautiful.”

I purse my lips and shake my head. “She hasn’t said. I’d think she’s unattached, considering how boldly she was flirting with me at the tournament. I’m not sure you’ll have much luck there, Dary.” I rest my hand on his arm, offering him an apologetic smile.

“She’s a sapphic, Dary. How’d you miss that, with tension between them at the tournament?” Mira rolls her eyes.

“I didn’t—well. I *did* notice the flirting, but I assumed Taryn started that, you know how she is.”

“How I am?” I scoff. “But yes, she’s a sapphic. I’m sure of it.”

“Quite my luck,” he grumbles, surveying the crowd. I follow his line of sight and find the object of his attention, the Lady Anna herself. Her long blonde hair is loosely braided down the middle of her scalp, the tail of the braid hanging over her shoulder. She *is* beautiful, he’s right.

“Do you fancy her?” he asks, and I realize he’s been watching me stare at her across the room this entire time.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “She’s beautiful, you’re right. I don’t think anyone can argue that. But there’s something about her—and the king as well—that’s . . . off-putting, isn’t there?”

Mira quickly nods her agreement and Dary reluctantly does the same.

“I think that’s why I’m drawn to her. Whatever it is that’s off about her, I think it has a different effect on men than women,” he mutters as he points across the room. Several known bachelors surround Lady Anna. She stands with her back straight, taller than several of them and shakes her

head. I can't hear the conversation, but I imagine her politely declining something. A dance, perhaps.

"There's something different about all of them," Mira says quietly. "They're so stiff. I always imagined the kingdom in the north to be more barbaric. They wear the armor, they seem to have strange social graces, but watch how they move. It's as if their entire bodies are tense, all of them, even the knights."

"When did you become so perceptive?" I ask, raising my eyebrow. She's right, of course, they are very stiff compared to the rest of the visiting kingdoms. Though, part of that could possibly be due to the fact that they're surrounded by strangers in a kingdom they've never visited before. Nerves and fear have strange effects on people.

"Of course, I noticed it about the knights first," she whispered. Dary coughed to cover his laugh and Mira narrowed her eyes. "Still, I'm right."

"You are," Dary admits. "But let's gossip later. It's a night for celebration, is it not? The jubilee, the lottery, so many things to be thankful for."

"Congratulations again, Mira. I know someone fantastic will win," I laugh.

"Now," Dary says cheerfully, clapping his hands together. "Which one of you ladies is going to dance with me?"

I'm already shaking my head when Mira pushes me toward him, laughing. "I think it's Taryn's turn to show you off," she laughs.

"Dary, no," I hiss as he slips his hand into mine, already pulling me toward the dance floor. I look over my shoulder in time to see Lord Terrick approaching Mira, offering his hand with a similar promise. She blushes and follows him toward the crowd swarming the dance floor.

"Why do you always tell me no?" Dary asks as he spins me into the steps we're meant to follow for this song.

"Because only Mira and I ever do," I answer honestly.

"That's true. I'm not sure how you two ended up so immune to my . . . charms," he chuckles, crossing our arms one over the other. "It's disheartening."

"I'm sure you'll survive it, love." As he spins me around the floor, maneuvering us between other couples, I can't help but laugh and enjoy the music. Dary is a good dance partner.

He spins me in a small circle, my dress twirling out far more than appropriate for someone of my station, but I don't have the heart to stop. It's exhilarating, this freedom.

A loud bang—louder even than the music—interrupts my fun. I stop spinning, steadying myself with my hand on my stomach as I search out the source of the commotion. The music stops as my eyes fall on the wooden doors to the ballroom bouncing off the walls. A harried knight pushes through the crowd, murmuring his apologies as he searches out his intended target: my father.

"My king," he calls out when he reaches the table father rests at. The knight drops to his knee, holding something in his hands. At first glance, I wasn't sure who he was, but now I can tell. It's Morgan. I move a bit closer, trying to see what he holds in his hands.

A grey cloth covers the object as he bows his head to my father.

"Rise, Morgan," Father sighs. "What could possibly be so important you'd interrupt the jubilee in such a way?" He glances around the room to the curious nobles and visiting rulers. As he strokes his white beard, Morgan unfolds the cloth, revealing something precious that was lost long ago.

Father goes still and I gasp, moving forward to see the heirloom up close. In his hands, Morgan holds a crown. At the center, where crown jewels would normally sit, instead rests a teal rose, glittering with the small gems that comprise it. My hand flies to my chest as fresh grief and shock rush through my veins as strong as any river.

Where did he get my mother's crown?

It was lost during the raid that killed her.

"Where did you find this?" Father snaps, rising from his seat. He quickly takes the crown from the knight, his hands shaking as he examines it. But I can tell, even from this distance, that it's hers. That teal rose was my mother's family crest. She adopted it as her seal when she married Father, because she couldn't bear to part with something so important to her family's heritage. She came from an old blood line, old royalty. Before Vanir and Tabistak were split into two separate kingdoms by a long ago war, my mother's people had ruled them as one.

"Roses are important," she'd say when I was a child. "They're beautiful and deadly. They adapt to whatever environment you give them; they can grow as vine or bush. People are like roses, Taryn. They're

beautiful and adaptable, but you have to be careful which ones you get close to. The thorns are always a pain."

"In a dragon's mountain," Morgan answers as he stands to his feet. His armor sports black marks across and I wonder, for a moment, how close he must have come to losing his life to return this to us.

"Then it's true. The beasts killed my Nadia," Father growls, his grip on the crown tightening. "We will mobilize an attack against them, at once!"

"Father!" I cry out, taking the last few steps to stand by his side. My eyes well up with unshed tears, tears I don't dare cry—they'll only stoke his rage higher. We can't attack the dragons, it would be disastrous for our people. I wrap my hands around the other end of the crown, choking back a sob when he releases it to me. My fingers stroke the delicate metalwork as I speak, my heart heavy with the renewed grief this precious trinket brings. "It's been so long since we lost Mother. I miss her every day. But a war . . . with the dragons—"

"You'd let them go unpunished for taking your mother from us?" he snaps, his cheeks flaming red with his anger.

I shake my head, rushing on. "That's not what I mean, Father. We have to think of our people. She's gone. We lost her already, but we don't have to lose any of our people, now. It's a vile deed that was done long ago. We can't be sure the dragon who had the crown is even the one who struck mother—"

"Quiet, girl," he snaps, his bright blue eyes flashing with an anger I'm unaccustomed to. I gasp, stumbling backward as if he *struck* me with his words. And in truth, it feels as if he does.

He never speaks to me like that. And any reprimanding he's ever done has always been in private. I know he's grief stricken and angry . . . but he's not seeing reason. I shake my head, laying the crown softly on the table before backing up. Tears sting the corner of my eyes and I try to hold them there, but it's impossible to hold back a storm. As I make my way back to my friends, tears streak down my cheeks.

"Tabistak will stand with Vanir as always," Dary's father calls out. The queen nods her head in agreement with her husband.

"As will I."

"And us."

"We will, as well."

Voices ring throughout the ballroom, all of them rushing to agree with the king. I watch as my father nods to each of his peers before his eyes land on Aeron of Izvora. The blonde king scratches his jaw before shaking his head, breaking the awkward eye contact.

“War with the dragons is unwise, even for such a just cause as this . . . tragedy.”

“You’d never hold them accountable?”

“I’m not saying they’re blameless creatures,” Aeron replies, his eyes narrowing as his face hardens. “But winning a *war* against beasts such as that would be hard and you would suffer heavy losses.”

“I thought Izvora was famed for dragon hunting?” someone calls out from the crowd. Aeron’s eyes never leave my father, but he answers the voice just the same.

“Slaying a beast and going to war are two very different things.”

My father’s shoulders tense. I can tell some small part of him wants to strike the northern king, but he won’t. Not only would it be an act of war, it would be an embarrassment. My father isn’t a young man anymore. His round belly and advanced age don’t afford him the advantage of the younger, fit king staring him down. He’d lose. And he would never recover from the implications of that loss.

“The jubilee is in honor of the accords de paix. Let us speak of war later,” the mage suggests, breaking her silence as she comes to stand by my father’s side. Power cracks in her words, magic that I can’t place. She wouldn’t dare influence a room full of nobles and royalty, but I find myself wondering if she’s *capable* of such a thing.

Ona’s eyes slide to mine, a sad smile across her face as she tosses her long white hair over her shoulder.

“Of course. Of course, you’re right, Ona,” Father mumbles, raking a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. I’d never dishonor the accords.” With that, he nods his head respectfully to the room, carefully grabs the crown from the table, and makes his exit, bustling past the gaping faces of every member of high society in Lazoreat.

When he leaves the ballroom, a quiet murmur begins, and I shake my head. A heavy weight presses into my chest, like someone sitting on top of me, refusing to let me move, to let me breathe.

“Taryn,” Mira whispers coming to my side. She throws her arms around me and stands there, making little *shh* sounds against my hair. “It’s

okay. It's going to be okay."

"That must have been hard," Dary murmurs, rubbing my arm compassionately while Mira strangles me with her hold. I step back from her embrace and nod, wiping at my eyes.

"I never thought we'd see that crown again. Mother's seal—"

"I'm so sorry, Taryn," Mira whispers, grabbing my hands. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Anything at all. Just name it," Dary adds, smiling sadly at me.

I shake my head, sniffing. I hate crying. I've always abhorred the practice and avoided it at all costs. "Gods, this is embarrassing. They'll be gossiping for weeks."

"Longer, probably," Dary snarls. "But fuck them. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"He's right, if a little murderous. You've done nothing wrong, Taryn. You're allowed to mourn her."

"I thought I already had," I whisper, shaking my head as if I can shake the grief from my mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN



I follow Mira through the crowd, laughing as we pass another group of drunken party-goers. The gala is beautiful. Ona has outdone herself this year. Tiny lights float a few feet above the crowd, illuminating the celebration. When a few soar down around us, I can't help but smile at my friend.

"It's absolutely magical," she whispers in awe, reaching out to touch a tiny orb before it flits away back to its place above our heads.

"Well, it is magic," I point out, biting the tip of my tongue when she rolls her eyes at me.

"Where is Dary?" she asks suddenly, leaning to look around me. "He best not have abandoned us for some maid," she pouts.

"Mira, do you fancy Dary?" I ask suddenly, quietly so no one will hear. I've had my suspicions for quite some time, even before we called off our engagement. It's always been painstakingly obvious she thinks he's handsome, but who can blame her? He is. It never offended me, and it still doesn't, though it does sting that my closest friend wouldn't share something so important with me. I've never said anything, because I understand why Mira has kept the crush to herself.

While it would be an advantageous match for her family, Mira is well below a prince, socially. As much as I hate it, it's true. Even the nobility my family deeded hers couldn't change that.

She goes completely still, her eyes slowly raising to mine. Her hesitation is all the answer I need but still, I wait to hear her try to talk her

way out of it.

“Taryn, I—” her eyes water in the corners as she shakes her head. “I’d never betray you.”

“Betray me? How could you loving someone betray me?”

“You were promised. I wouldn’t—”

“You’ve known I was a sapphic since we were children, Mira. You loving Dary makes no difference to me.” I wrap my arms around her neck and whisper near her ear, “You should tell him. At the very least, before the lottery is drawn. Starting a new life with secrets weighing down your heart is something I don’t want for you.”

Mira snuffles into my hair and I stroke her back, sighing. “Besides, it’s painfully obvious.”

“It is not,” she hisses.

“It is. I think he fancies you too, you know.”

“What?” she shrieks, leaning back to glance at my face. “He doesn’t.”

“I think he might. He does get a bit jealous of your crushes when he visits. And you, his.”

“I—” Mira’s face falls and she shakes her head. “I’m convinced he’s in love with you.” I can tell she believes it when she says it, even though I wholeheartedly disagree.

“I think Dary did love me, once. But we’re just friends now, Mira. And even if he had some leftover emotions for me, nothing can come of them. I don’t see him—or anyone like him—in *that* light. There’s nothing to be done about it.”

“But—”

“No buts. You need to tell him. He’s one of your closest friends and deserves to know. Your other closest friend demands it.” I smile at her as she blushes, avoiding my gaze.

“I think he’ll always prefer you, Taryn. Even if he was interested in me, even if his family allowed—”

“Let Dary make that decision for himself. Even if nothing comes of it, you’re going to be married soon, to someone,” I huff, gesturing to the crowd of nobles around us. “You’ll wonder your entire life what might have happened if you told him. Even if you truly believe nothing *can* happen. Wouldn’t you want to know?”

Mira glances away then straightens her spine. I don’t look over my shoulder, I already know it has to be Dary approaching. The arm thrown

casually over my shoulder confirms it and I roll my eyes.

“Hello, ladies,” he laughs, smiling to us both and I shove him away from me playfully.

“If you get my dress dirty, I’ll run you through.”

“You couldn’t,” he scoffs.

“She could and you know it,” Mira laughs, all the awkwardness from the moment before gone. I hope she takes my advice. I would want to know if someone were in love with me. If only to ease their curiosity with a gentle truth. I would want to know.

But, perhaps that’s just my vanity speaking.

“It is a beautiful gown,” Mira says, reaching down to pet the shimmering material. It glimmers beneath the orb lights and sparkles like a thousand pink gems as I swish it back and forth, giggling.

“It is. I’ve been saving it all year for the jubilee,” I admit.

“You are a vain little thing,” Dary sighs dramatically.

“Leave her be, it’s gorgeous.” Mira pinches his arm and he jumps, scowling at her.

“How is it you’re so comfortable assaulting royalty?” he asks, narrowing his eyes even as his lips curve into a wicked smile.

“Well,” Mira begins, batting her eyelashes sarcastically. “I hardly ever piss you both off at once. So, if you were to punish me for acting out and Taryn wanted, she could start a war for it. And vice versa. I’m perfectly safe.” With that, she pinches him again and I cover my mouth, watching as a man I don’t recognize approaches our little group.

“Lady Mira?” he says behind her, bowing his head to me respectfully as she turns around. I nod to him then tilt my head, inspecting the noble. I’m not sure which kingdom he’s attached to, but I don’t recognize him. He’s only a little older than us, no lines creasing his face quite yet.

“Yes?” she asks in a squeaky voice.

“I’m Lord Fallon,” he murmurs, bowing to her. “I was wondering if you’d walk with me? I’m considering entering this wedding lottery of yours, but I’m afraid we’ve never met. I’d like to remedy that.”

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead and I smirk, amused by the man’s boldness. “Well,” I laugh, shooing Mira away. “Go on, then.”

Mira blushes and takes Fallon’s hand, following him through the crowd. I turn to Dary, only to find him still staring after her. “She’ll find a good match, right?” he asks.

“She will,” I answer carefully. I don’t want to betray Mira’s trust. If they don’t find one another on their own, my meddling is worthless. I can’t hold them together. It doesn’t work like that, and I know it.

“Come on,” Dary sighs, grabbing my hand. I follow him through the crowd in the opposite direction, gawking at the acrobats performing tricks along the tops of the stalls where the games are housed.

“It’s meant to be a carnival,” I laugh. “My father’s idea. Ona indulged him, begrudgingly, I think. But it seems to have worked out wonderfully.”

“It’s certainly mesmerizing,” he whispers in awe as a woman slides down a silk rope strung across the clearing, twisting her legs in strange ways as she dangles with her hands below her.

I tilt my head to the side, wondering how she keeps ahold of it. “I’d fall if I tried that.”

“Please, by all the Gods, don’t,” he snickers, shaking his head as we’re met by another group of people.

“Princess!” a girl from Linolin calls and I cringe.

“I’ve never liked that one,” I hiss to Dary and he chuckles, waving to the group as they grow closer.

“Happy Jubilee!”

“Happy Jubilee,” I reply, smiling at the group.

They descend into small talk and I answer with the appropriate niceties from time to time. Mostly, I search the crowd for Mira. It’s strange, not having her at my side during these functions.

I suppose I’ll have to get used to that, since she’s getting married. A strange weight settles in my stomach at that thought. Mira and Dary are the only two people I’d really call *friends*. Sure, I know plenty of people—everyone wants to know the princess, of course. But those two are the only ones that have ever felt like they wanted to know *me*. Mira is the only girl who has ever treated me like any other girl at court. And Dary, he’s the same as me in some ways. He’s used to people wanting to be close to him because of his title and hates it as much as I do.

I nudge Dary slightly when a head full of flowing golden hair starts coming our way.

The other nobles bow their heads when Lady Anna steps into our little circle. She doesn’t even acknowledge them, instead focusing her attention solely on me.

“You look stunning tonight, princess,” she purrs.

“Thank you,” I answer, looking her over. I can feel the eyes of everyone else present boring into us, judging, but I’m not concerned. They won’t say anything; they never have.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lady—”

Anna cuts them off with a wave of her hand. The sound of someone snorting meets my ears but I’m too busy taking in Anna’s strange attire to look and see who is so amused by her lack of social graces.

The chain mail across her chest is loosely woven—I doubt it would do much good in an actual battle—lending a bit of feminine charm to the look. A gilded corset wraps around her waist, doubling as more armor. Chainmail flows from the bottom of the corset like a very short skirt, but she wears leather tights beneath it.

“Your gown is lovely. I think pink might be your color,” she murmurs, drawing my gaze back to her strange sun-colored eyes. “Would you like to dance with me?”

Before I can answer, the sound of Dary chuckling interrupts my thoughts and I glance at him.

“Well done,” he snickers, clapping his hands together slowly.

“Hush,” I snap, taking her offered hand. I’m convinced the woman is mad or feral, she looks at me more like I’m a meal than a woman, but what could it hurt to dance with her? Perhaps she’ll change my mind.

Anna leads me away from the small group and through the crowd until we reach the dance floor. Several couples spin drunkenly to the music while performers dance on their silk ropes around the clearing.

Her fingers twine through mine, and again, I’m struck by how hot her skin is. “Do you have a fever?” I ask.

“No,” she answers, looking puzzled as her other hand slides around my waist to my lower back. “Why?”

“You feel very warm,” I murmur quietly as she pulls me closer to her, leading me around the dancefloor in a spinning circle as she stares down at me.

“Ah, well,” she laughs. “It’s very warm here compared to Izvora.”

“What is your kingdom like?” I ask, my free hand resting carefully against her collar bone. The cool metal of the chainmail beneath my fingertips clashes with the warmth radiating from Anna herself. The texture tempts me run my fingers over it, but I resist the urge. I know precisely how it’ll look, considering where it’s located.

“It’s . . . snowy. Our castle is nestled atop a mountain and it’s always cool there, even in summer.”

“That must be very different than Vanir,” I muse as she grips me tighter, her fingers brushing over the bare skin of my back.

“It’s quite different,” she answers, her voice a little husky as the music changes to something more sensual. Her hips swirl into mine as we follow the steps for the song and my cheeks flush.

“What’s wrong, princess?”

“Nothing,” I lie, ignoring the heat in my core. I’ve never been one to deny myself something I want—and I very much want Anna—but something keeps making me pull away. I put a little distance between our bodies, mirroring my thoughts as I try to catch my breath.

“It is very different,” she continues. “But I’ve always dreamed about living in the south.” Anna’s eyes stare down into mine, and for a moment, I could swear I saw something move.

I drop her hand step back, my hand resting on my chest. Her eyebrows cinch together as she looks at me quizzically, still holding out a hand. “Are you alright?”

“I—” I shake my head. I’m losing my bloody mind, that’s what’s wrong. I’m seeing things. As I stare at Anna now, I can see as plain as day that there is nothing moving in her eyes.

But there is something there I didn’t expect to find. Lady Anna’s eyes narrow on me for just a second before she drops her hand. The annoyance brewing in those golden eyes gives me pause. I’ve done nothing to draw her ire, and yet, I can tell she’s fuming just beneath her skin.

Before I can ask her about it, a mighty roar splits the night. My hands fly to my ears as I whirl around, searching for the source of the sound. Of course, there’s only one thing that can make a sound like that . . .

A dragon.

Against the dark sky, a large dragon with pink scales hovers. She beats her wings, roaring her fury again. Fire spews from her nostrils as she roars, rolling out of the large orifices like water over a cliff.

“I want what is mine, Vanir,” she bellows.

Dragons can talk? I blink staring up at the strange sight even as Anna draws the short sword from her hip behind me. The dragons in children’s stories can speak, but I’ve never heard that they can *actually* speak.

“Get behind me, Taryn,” Anna hisses, maneuvering herself in front of me as she raises her sword. The dragon’s head whips around searching the crowd for her target: my father.

I watch in horror as knights push through the crowd. Some of them circle my father and some come to form a line around me. I search the faces in the crowd for Mira. Dary can defend himself, but Mira has never so much as *held* a sword.

“She’s here for the crown,” I gasp hopelessly. I have no idea where it is or I’d give it back to end this, to stop whatever is about to happen. Nothing good can come from an angry dragon in Vanir.

Fire spews from the dragon’s snout, igniting the carnival stalls and people dart away from the flames. I turn in a circle, examining the devastation behind me. The fire reflecting in Anna’s eyes casts a cruel shadow on her face, highlighting her sharp features, making her look even more feral.

“Murderer!” My father’s familiar voice shouts over the roar of the panicked crowd. My eyes flash to him even as the knights around me push in closer, forming a solid wall of defense. Though, I’m not sure how that’s supposed to protect me from something that can fly.

An arrow flies toward the dragon. It bounces off her thick, scaly hide and she shakes her head, roaring her frustration. Her wings beat in slow motion, my heart pounding in my ears as she rains fire down on the celebration.

Screams echo all around me. I’m not sure if they’re screaming in fear or pain. I stumble backward, into the chest of a knight. My eyes squint, searching through the smoke for my father.

“Father!” I cry out, panicked.

The dragon’s head twists, her large eyes zeroing in on me. My eyes widen when she flies toward us, snarling her lip back. “A treasure was taken from me,” she hisses, spitting fire at a knight as he rushes toward her with his sword held high.

I wince as I watch Callum fall, his arm melting to his body as he screams.

“Your treasure is not here,” Anna growls, brandishing her sword as she, again, places herself between me and danger.

The dragon’s head rears back, her long neck curving as she surveys the new threat. Her snout parts with a roar that vibrates my very bones as she

blasts fire at Lady Anna's feet. Anna merely squares her shoulders, deepening her stance as she stares down the massive beast.

"Murderess," the dragon hisses and my eyes widen.

Who have we murdered?

Anna steps around the flames, her eyes never leaving the raging beast focused on her. When Anna moves forward, I think for a moment she may actually be able to strike the dragon.

But the dragon only huffs smoke, flicking her tail and sending the northern woman flying across the ground as she lands in the grass. Her tail lashes back and forth behind her as she focuses on me. Several of the knights rush toward her. "Protect the princess!" they yell, slashing at her with their weapons.

I scramble toward a fallen knight, wrapping my hands around the hot metal handle of the sword he died holding. My heart pounds against my ribs as I dart toward the scurrying crowd.

She's going to punish me to get back at my father.

She's going to kill me.

That dragon is going to kill me, just like she killed my mother.

I shake the thoughts from my head as the sound of magic cracking in the air rings through the clearing.

"Witch," the dragon roars and another surge of heat warms my back. I won't look. I can't. I have to get away from this place.

My fingers cling to the sword as I bump into someone. They quickly hurry away from me without a word. I can't fault them. Everyone wants to survive this.

The sound of wings overhead draws my eye and I slide to a stop as the dragon drops down from below, cutting off my escape. She eyes me carefully, taking one step forward, then another.

For every step she takes toward me, I take one back, holding the sword in front of me. I'm no master swordsman, but I've been taught the basics. I know how to defend myself, for all the good that'll do against a Gods damned *dragon*.

"Vanir, if you won't return my most prized treasure, I shall take yours," she roars, knocking down another line of men with her tail as they rush toward her.

I shake my head, looking around for something or someone that can help me. My eye's fall on Dary and Mira as they scramble away from a

piece of flaming fabric. The jubilee has fallen into chaos. People scurry toward the castle to seek shelter. The entire field is in flames. I can't see my father or his knights through the smoke.

Anna lays unconscious—if not dead—somewhere nearby. The knights are making no headway against the beast.

All of a sudden, as if she's become bored with this game, the rose colored dragon lifts into the air and flies toward me, her claws wrapping around my middle as she soars higher into the air. The huge digits dig into my ribs, bruising me, I'm sure, as we lift higher into the sky.

"Ungh," I grunt, fighting against her hold. My grip on the sword tightens as I try to saw at the strange finger-like appendages wrapped around me. They may as be made of steel, themselves.

"Stop that nonsense unless you want to fall to your death," the dragon snaps, her head hanging down staring at me for a moment before she turns her attention back to the sky.

"My daughter! Taryn!" my father screams below, his voice fading by with every beat of the dragon's wings. "She's taken my daughter now, too!" he bellows on the ground somewhere below.

"As if you care, you beast," I screech, stabbing the end of the sword against the monstrous claws wrapped around me to no avail.

"So be it," she sighs, and the claws begin to relax.

My stomach lurches into my throat as gravity catches hold, my arms flying out, scrabbling to grab on to something, anything. I watch as the sword plummets below us, the ground growing further and further away as she takes us higher into the clouds above. When her claws hold me securely again, I take a deep breath.

My heartbeat pounding in my ears nearly obscures the deep rumbling voice when she finally speaks again. "Now stop, Tiny Treasure. I've lost one piece of my hoard, I don't plan to lose anymore."

I open my mouth to speak but think better of it as I watch the ground disappear beneath the clouds. The wind whips past me, chilling me to the core even though it's early spring. On the ground it was fairly warm—not too cool, not too hot, just perfect to be outdoors. Up here, however it's nearly freezing and then there's the fall to worry about . . .

"What in the Gods' names am I supposed to do now?"

"Being quiet is a wonderful place to start," the dragon growls. I wrap my arms around her claw to hold on, just in case she tries to drop me

again. I don't trust her temper—or my own—right now.

Everywhere my skin touches hers, heat sears into me, warming me against the frigid winds as we soar toward the mountains.

At least, I won't freeze, the sarcastic voice of my subconscious cuts through my terror and I find myself wanting to laugh. I'm hysterical—I have to be hysterical. The panic has finally gotten to me and the thin strings of my sanity are finally going to snap.

Fantastic.

CHAPTER EIGHT



As we glide over the top of a mountain, a hole in the side of the next one becomes clear, the moonlight illuminating the rockface enough to show the shadow where the cave begins. There's no mountainside, no hills, nothing leading to the entrance that the dragon dives toward. It's simply an opening in the side of the mountain, with nothing but a sheer drop-off below.

She surges through the opening, dropping me on my ass with little care. I rub my hips and my sides, groaning now that the pressure is gone from them. I suppose it could be much worse; she could have eaten me. Still, I'm sore, tired, confused, and I've been taken hostage by a *dragon*.

The same dragon who killed my mother.

I swallow as that thought reverberates through my skull. Will she kill me, too?

"What do you mean to do with me?" I ask suddenly, rising to my feet as I watch the gigantic beast move through the cavern. Moonlight casts strange shadows in the room, highlighting piles of gold and relics taller than me littered throughout the room.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask again. The dragon snorts, ignoring me, as if I'd suddenly forget she can speak. My nostrils flare and I reach into the pile nearest me, my fingers wrapping around something hard and round. A chalice. I turn it over in my hand before slinging it in the direction of the monstrous creature. It clammers uselessly to the ground

near her back leg and she stops, her neck swiveling around, bringing her snout to face me where I stand.

“Careful, Treasure,” she snarls.

“I’m no treasure,” I snap, my frustration boiling over. I’m terrified of the beast. I know what she’s capable of, but I refuse to be cowed like some useless girl. If she’s going to kill me, nothing I do will change that, and if she doesn’t plan to kill me, then there’s a good reason and very *few* things I do will change that. “Do you have any idea who I am?” I know she must. She called me Vanir’s ‘*most prized treasure*’ before she stole me away. She must know I’m my father’s daughter.

“I know precisely who you are, Princess of Vanir.” The deep growl that accompanies those words sends a shiver down my spine. Whatever shock and anger have been keeping my fear pushed down slowly begins to recede as those bright pink eyes hone in on me again. This time, there’s no knights to defend me, and I don’t even have a weapon.

Perhaps she does intend to kill me. If she does, I just hope it’s quick. I have no intention of being some plaything she tortures for fun. I’ve heard stories . . . some dragons *eat* the humans they kill.

I don’t want that either, I realize, as a shudder sends my head shaking side to side.

“Are you having a fit?” she asks, taking a step closer.

“Do you mean to kill me like you killed my mother?” I ask suddenly, scrambling back a step. I bump into a pile of treasure and cringe as something metallic hits the stone floor.

The dragon snorts a small burst of flames from her nostrils. “I did no such thing,” she growls, shaking her wings against her sides. “Your father impugns my honor with lies such as that one.”

“Then why did you have her crown?” I scoff as I sink to the ground, leaning my back against the large pile of gold. There’s more gold in here than in our entire treasury. Father would have a fit if he saw all this wealth. We could finance the entire kingdom for generations . . . more, maybe.

“I found it. And when I found it, your mother had no need of it, I assure you.” The dragon tilts her head up, as if daring me to contradict her and I ponder that for a moment.

The children’s stories always describe dragons as mythical beasts that speak in riddles. I never put much weight in those stories, but apparently,

they were right about the dragons being able to *speak* at all, so perhaps there was truth in them, yet.

This one seems to like speaking in strange circles, at least. She could have just as easily said she found the crown after my mother was killed, but she didn't use those words. Why? I groan, pulling at my hair until it slips free from its bindings. When I look up, combing my fingers through the tangled mess left behind by the braids, I find the dragon staring at me.

It's uncomfortable, the way she eyes me. It's as if she's eying a juicy steak. "Are you going to eat me?" I ask, realizing she never *really* answered my question before.

"You'd be barely a morsel," she growls. She? I realize I've been calling the dragon a female in my mind because of the coloring, but I could be wrong about that. How does one tell with their kind?

"Are you a—" I swish my mouth to the side, wondering why I even care. I suppose it makes a difference in how I speak to the strange creature. "Are you a female?"

"Is that important?"

"Not really," I mutter. "I was curious because of your coloring. I've never heard of a dragon with your coloring, I assumed you must be female . . . and then I realized how sexist that was. You could be a male. I suppose you don't get to choose the color of your scales any more than I was able to choose my hair color—"

"Is there a point in there, somewhere, princess?" The dragon tilts its head to the side and for a moment, I could swear she looks amused. I'm almost certain it's female.

I open my mouth to answer but a chuckle fills the cavern.

"I am female," she finally answers before making her way back toward the ledge. Her tail flicks toward a tunnel in the back of the room I didn't notice. "You'll find a room with water—"

"This isn't some friendly visit, dragon. You've taken me hostage and I want to return home. I have nothing to do with your quarrel with my father or his men." I know I shouldn't antagonize her. I *know* I should go find whatever room she was telling me about and be a good prisoner until someone rescues me or I escape, but something about the creature's nonchalant attitude emboldens me.

"They took my most prized possession, princess. I will return you when they return what is mine. That's fair, isn't it?"

“A person and a trinket are hardly equal,” I mutter, tugging at the side of my dress. The lacing is digging into my skin, a byproduct of it being worn too long or perhaps from doing too much physical activity while wearing it. Ballgowns are not meant to be worn during attacks and kidnappings, after all. I roll my eyes at that thought.

“Yes,” the dragon huffs, laying down near the ledge. “But you’ll have to do.” Her lips curl up in what looks like a smile and I narrow my eyes, biting my tongue against the words I have for that.

I trudge through the cavern, ignoring the chuckling behind me as I make my way into the dark tunnel. A few torches line the stone walls, lighting up otherwise dark, stone tunnel with flickering firelight. As I mutter to myself about the ridiculousness of being compared to a piece of jewelry—even if it’s very nice jewelry—I run my hand along the wall, waiting to find this room the dragon spoke of.

Eventually, I find a small opening on the left. The door is small, not large enough for the dragon to fit into, I realize. As I walk in, my eyes go wide. On the far wall, water seeps down the stone in a gentle, miniature waterfall of sorts. I peer up at the ceiling, wondering how such a thing was possible. The luck of such a thing happening naturally . . . I can’t fathom the odds.

This much smaller cave really is too perfectly formed to be a natural occurrence, I think as I take a step toward the water. I run my hands beneath it, letting my palms fill with the cool liquid before I bring it to my mouth to drink. It’s delicious.

On the other side of the ‘room’ there are piles of clothing, neatly folded along the wall and I wonder who they belong to.

“Gods, how many prisoners does this beast keep?” I mumble to no one as I strip out of my dress. There’s a bar of crude soap hanging from a small rock jutting out from the wall. I sigh, rubbing the soap beneath the water until suds coat my hands and finally begin cleaning myself. “Father will fix this, I know he will,” I whisper.

I don’t know if it’s a prayer or a hope, but I will the words to come to fruition with every fiber in my being. I want to go home.

CHAPTER NINE



Niressa

I watch the human make her way clumsily through the tunnel and snort quietly. My scales itch and I desperately want to change back into my human skin, but I know I can't.

I can't let the girl see me in my other form—not if I'm going to return her. And for now, I do plan on returning the little whelp to her kingdom. Surely Vanir will trade my treasure back for his daughter. It's the only wise decision he could make in such a situation. I shake my head, moving from the ledge toward my piles of treasure, inspecting them as I go.

Part of me is still distressed that humans even dared to intrude on my nest. Was nothing sacred anymore? It's true that there have been problems between the dragonkin and the humans in the past, small flareups of theatrical violence, for the most part. Never, however, have humans been so stupid as to raid a dragon's home. At least, not that I've ever heard of.

Though, it's entirely possible that the dragons whose nests *had* been invaded were just too embarrassed to speak of such a violation. I don't consider myself a particularly vain person, but even I am upset a human would *dare* intrude upon my space.

My eyes rake over each pile of treasure carefully, making note of where each piece is. I'm not sure if I will ever attach to a piece of my hoard in the way the old dragons warn. There are a few pieces that hold particular sentimental value—my eyes roam the room for them, as if

checking that they're still there, even though I just counted everything within sight—but nothing that I think I'd die without.

And that's the problem with a dragon's hoard.

Once we become attached to a treasure, we bond with it. Losing it will drive the dragon mad and even make them ill. We are obsessive creatures by nature. That's the nature of our beasts.

I've always been particularly fond of pretty things, no matter their value. I know of dragons who hoard only gold, or only silver. Those things are monetary in the humans' world and it makes sense for a modern dragon to keep such things. You never know when you'll have to deal with the humans.

The crown fits my own archetype more closely.

It's a very valuable piece of art, since it belonged to the queen. But that isn't why I adore it so much. I found it in the charred remains of a carriage passing between the mountains. The entire convoy was destroyed, razed by other dragonkin. The crown laid beside a woman, a beautiful dark-haired beauty, much like the one currently occupying my nest. Her blue eyes saw nothing as they stared up at me in death—her spirit gone before I arrived.

I knew who she was. I knew the emblem on the crown was a mark of the Lazoras. Their family ruled Lazoreat before it was split into smaller kingdoms. The teal rose was their calling card—the flower only grew in the small valley they claimed as their home.

But, when I found the queen dead in her carriage, I didn't care that she was the queen. I didn't care that the crown sparkled in the setting sun. I cared about that play on words.

A teal rose.

For a teal and rose dragon.

Something about the continuity of those words settled the anger in me that day, and still to this day, they still do. I love that crown. And while I may not be attached to it in the way the old dragons speak of, I will not be cheated out of my treasure.

My claws dig into the stone beneath my feet as a familiar face flashes across my mind. The blonde hair cascading down her back, the way she held the sword so ferociously, as if she might actually use it. The Izvoras—as they call themselves—presence at the jubilee in Vanir confused me. I know that, in all their years, they have never signed the accords that the humans of Lazoreat struck all those years ago.

I know, without a doubt, though, that they must be plotting some political scheme to suddenly want to join the ranks of the other human kingdoms. And although I try not to concern myself with the politics of humans—or even dragonkin for that matter—it *was* curious to see her face in the throng. My stomach twists as old memories fight for dominance inside me and I shake my head, shooting smoke from my nostrils as my annoyance flares.

I should have killed her.

But that wasn't my goal tonight. And in truth, her presence in Vanir caught me so off guard, I was dumbfounded for a moment.

I narrow my eyes when the smoke doesn't clear. Instead, it changes, growing thicker and taking on a new vibrant color. My head rears back as I peer into the foggy magic, searching for its source. My lips snarl back, my fire clicking in my throat as I wait for something to happen.

Eventually, the form of a woman steps through the smoke. Her long white hair flows freely down her back and spills over her shoulders down to her breasts. Her pale skin seems to glow with a silver light, her pale green eyes tracking me as she tilts her chin up. Sorceresses have always annoyed me—they're as bad as their counterparts, the hunters.

I swipe my tail at her and growl when it flows through the illusion, tracing bits of smoke with it. "Bleeding magic," I rumble, lifting my neck to peer down at the woman with every ounce of disdain I can summon.

"Return the princess to Vanir, dragon," the woman replies in a cool voice, ignoring my obvious agitation.

"Return what was stolen from me and you can have her, witch." The sorceress narrows her eyes on me. I know her kind hates to be associated with the myths of their cousins, but she's trespassing on *my* domain and doesn't even have the nerve to do so in body. She's a coward.

"I am Ona, the king's mage in Vanir. We have maintained a peaceful existence at the foot of these mountains since the time of the old dragons," the mage says carefully. "Even when our queen was taken from us by the claws of your own kind—by you, perhaps—we remained peaceful." She takes a long breath, clasping her hands in front of her waist. I slip my tail through the illusion again, wondering how she manages such a feat as she continues on. "The proof of the queen's murder will cause a war, eventually. The king can be dissuaded if his child is returned unharmed."

Slowly, I lower my head until my snout is merely inches from the apparition's face. "I will not barter with you, witch. Return what is mine and you may have her. Until then, she will serve as the replacement for what's been taken from me." I swallow the fire threatening to spill from my snout, instead snorting smoke. "And do not threaten me with war, *mage*. Your kind exists as the leisure of mine. I could have razed your kingdom to the ground in search of what was taken from me and picked it from the ashes of your dead. I chose not to because senseless death should be avoided when possible. Do not sway my liberal views," I snap, my teeth clacking together harshly.

To her credit, the mage doesn't react. She doesn't jump or show any other sign of the fear that a normal human would experience. I wonder, for a moment, how I appear to her wherever she is, practicing this magic. All she does is nod before the illusion dissipates into nothing more than wisps of smoke.

My wings spread, beating slowly a few times to speed the remaining magic out of my nest. I trust her kind even *less* than ordinary humans. Sorceresses and sorcerers cannot be trusted; it's too easy for them to find out things they have no business knowing.

In the old days, their kind knew the truth about dragonkin. Some even claim that they're related to us, distantly. The old dragons think magical humans are just dragonkin whose magic evolved differently—instead having a noble form, they can manipulate the world around them.

I much prefer my fire and scales.

I blow a circle of fire onto the stone floor near the ledge and curl up into a ball atop it, smothering the flames with my body as the heat soothes my scales. My tail tucks beneath my chin, pillow of sorts, as my eyes slowly begin to close.

The princess hasn't made her way back to the treasure room yet. No doubt, she's searching for a way out of the mountain. She won't find it. Not alone. Not at night. With that, I close my eyes, letting blue skies and clouds take me over.

CHAPTER TEN



I pull on the torch again, trying to dislodge it from the wall but it won't budge. I glare at it as I run my fingers over the smooth piece of metal holding it to the wall. There are no bolts to be found, only the strip of metal laid carefully across the torch. My fingers find the wilted edges and I gasp. It's been melted to the wall!

"How strange," I mutter before looking away, further down the tunnel. No light comes from that direction. With a deep breath, I make my way into the darkness. It doesn't take long before I'm completely enveloped in the black nothingness of the mountain. My fingers trace along the cool stone, grazing over bumps and crevices in the rock.

I have to at least *try* to escape this mountain. There must be a way out, through here somewhere. The fact that the lights end very early in the passage is telling. I'm sure the dragon only uses the landing where the treasure is stored, but surely there's an exit that doesn't end in a sheer drop off like the one behind me.

A sound ahead, like something sharp clicking across the floor, causes me to pause, my heartbeat quickening as I throw a hand in front of me to feel for anything in the dark. I feel nothing. My toe sweeps out, brushing my bare foot against the damp stone feeling for anything that might be a threat.

A distinct, low growl erupts from the darkness and my eyes go wide, as if that'll help me see in the dark. The dragon hasn't come after me yet; she probably doesn't think I can find my way out . . . or she *knows* I can't. Is

there something worse in these caves than the great beast who brought me here?

Taking a step backward, I swallow the fear threatening to bubble from my lips. My right hand slides along the wall, grounding me in some small way as I take another step, then another. I know better than to turn my back or to run. Whatever is in the darkness is a predator, and predatory instincts are to *chase*. If I run, I'll be inviting attack. If I turn my back, I'll be inviting attack.

I blow out a shaky breath as more growls fill the cavern. Images of monstrous beasts fill my mind as I stare into the dark, trying desperately to see what is stalking me. My feet slip in a puddle of water and I nearly lose my balance, a small squeal slipping past my lips. The answering snarls in the darkness sound closer.

Already, I can see the faint glow of the torches behind me. The light casts strange shadows over my shoulder. I watch the shadows as I continue my backward progression toward the dragon—at least I know I can *reason* with *that* predator. This beast in the darkness is much less likely to be intelligible.

I pass the first torch and nearly scream when it lights up the muzzle of a massive wolf. The scarred fur across its face wrinkles as it snarls, its lips up, lowering its head toward the ground as it takes a slow step forward. I scramble backward, passing the bathing chamber. I don't have far to go now, I reason with myself, my hands shaking as I cast my eyes downward.

"*Never look them in the eye,*" my father had said when he took me hunting. The bear we finally felled was a vicious beast and I'd made the mistake of looking it in the eye, drawing its anger toward me.

Wolves are probably the same. At least, in my mind, the logic holds.

I shudder as a massive paw comes closer, the sound of growls echoing off the walls of the tunnel. *There's an entire pack in here!*

Swallowing my fear, I take another step backward and find myself in the main cavern, treasure lining the walls. I don't look up from the ground until I'm well away from the tunnel.

When I do, two yellow eyes peer out at me, the massive black wolf highlighted by the torchlight behind it. It looks from me to the sleeping dragon behind me and looses one threatening growl before disappearing into the tunnel.

“Gods,” I mutter, plopping down on the ground. The wall behind me holds me up as I look to the slumbering giant, her tail hanging off the of the cliff as if she has no fear, no cares in the world at all. “How can she sleep through those growls?”

And then I realize, wolves are no threat to her kind. They’re no more a predator to her than a housecat is to me. I slide my hands into the long sleeves of the borrowed shirt I found in the bathing room and lean my head back against the wall. There’s no bed here, no blankets, no fire. I suppose the dragon keeps herself warm, but what am *I* supposed to do?

And how will I defend myself if those wolves decide to come into this cavern? I chew my lip bringing my knees up to my chest as I consider my options. I suppose they won’t want to get too close to the dragon—she could easily defeat them, and I’m sure they know that. Wolves are notoriously crafty creatures.

But that only makes me worry more about them lurking in the darkness. “*Smart foes are dangerous foes*,” my mother used to say. She was right. So very, very right.

I RUN TOWARD THE CARRIAGE, SCREAMING AS IT BURSTS INTO FLAMES. I HAVE to reach her, I have to save her. Fire so hot it burns blue around the edges erupts from the ground, but I know it comes from the sky. The teal and rose dragon beats its wings, spewing flames on the convoy.

A scream goes up, ringing in my ears, echoing. “Taryn!” she calls.

My mother scrabbles at the ground, rushing to her feet to run to me. “Taryn, run!” she screeches, her eyes going wide with terror.

My eyes brim with tears as I reach out for her, my fingers falling short as she bursts into flames before my very eyes.

“Mother!” I wail, watching in horror as her skin melts from her body, like candle wax falling away from the wick. Rage and loss swirl in my chest as her body collapses to the ground, her hand clinging to something.

The crown, glowing from the heat engulfing it, sparkles in the fading light.

“She had no need of it, I assure you,” the dragon sneers above me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I jolt awake, my heart racing. The smell of ash and death still fill my nose, as if I was actually *there*. My hands sweep across my chest, trying to keep my heart contained there as I glance around the large cavern.

“Dragon?” I call out, looking for the massive creature, but she’s nowhere to be found. I stretch my arms over my head, abandoning the panic of my fitful sleep as I appraise the cave in the daylight for the first time. Mountains of gold and silver shimmer everywhere I can see. I shake my head, wondering—not for the first time—what need a dragon has for gold. As I raise to my feet, a wind sweeps in from the cliff face and I walk to the ledge to peer over.

Mountains stretch out in every direction, slowly giving way to the valley that holds Vanir. I think it’s our valley, anyway. I sigh, shaking my head as I search the sky for the pink beast. Surely, she hasn’t abandoned me here in this mountain.

A dragon darts across the sky over a nearby mountain, but it’s not my captor. This one is the wrong color, a varying blend of green and blue from what I can tell. I purse my lips, scrambling back from the edge before I get eaten by yet another *different* beast and start to inspect the room properly. The hoard is impressive, that much I can say for sure.

Several weapons lay mixed with the precious contents of the cavern, and while some of them look to be valuable—swords with jeweled hilts and ornately carved bows—some of them are too plain to be considered

treasure. I pad toward a pile of such weapons, examining the long swords and daggers where they lay abandoned. *These must have belonged to men who attacked her cave*, I reason as I bend to pick up a long dagger. It's plain, the tapering blade straight with little in the way of decoration. I slip it into the waist of my borrowed trousers and look around, feeling defeated and rather small.

"Where are the bodies?" I wonder out loud. Did she eat them? Do dragons *actually* eat humans? Everyone says it, but I'm not sure if they do or not. It was easier to imagine them doing so before I found myself conversing with one. I could never eat anything that speaks . . . I wonder if they have such qualms. Of course, they're big enough to accomplish the task, but I wonder if they *want* to.

My fingers wrap around the hilt of the dagger as I make my way toward the tunnel, stepping carefully into the darker area. It's not completely black, even with the torches out, I realize as I pass the bathing room. A few advantageous cracks and holes in the ceiling allow the barest bit of light to filter through. "Who built this place?" I mutter quietly because I can't reconcile the design of the bathing chamber and these crude lighting system with coincidence or nature.

There doesn't seem to be any sign of the wolves from last night. No growls fill the tunnel and no click sound of claws on stone follow me through the dark. On my right, another room opens up and I glance inside, curious to what this one might hold—somehow, I must have missed it last night in the dark.

A large, circular bed rests in the center of the room, surrounded by lavish treasures stacked in the corners and sitting on parts of the wall that vaguely resemble shelves.

Rich colors coat everything. Deep reds and chocolate browns cover the bed, even the pillows sport their own flashy designs as I wander through the room, touching things as I browse the area.

It's a lovely bedchamber. Fit for a king.

Or a queen, I realize as I look down at my borrowed clothes and suddenly it starts to make more sense. I'd wondered if the dragon had another prisoner, but I'm starting to think she has a *companion* of some kind, instead. Clearly, *someone* lives in this cave with the dragon, perhaps a sorceress of some kind. I can't imagine any normal person wanting to spend so much time with a dragon, anyway. Maybe the dragon is like a sort

of . . . pet . . . or familiar for the sorceress. It's strange, but I suppose it could happen. If there's magic involved, anything is possible.

I take another look around the room, my gaze sliding across personal belongings, clothing, and a tapestry hung over some sort of stone chair. My nose wrinkles as I slide my fingers down the design, a lion sitting atop a hill, roaring at a storm.

It's powerful imagery.

But not something I'd expect a sorceress to own. Lions are notoriously used to represent those factions of people who would see a world without magic. In my studies, I learned it's used widely as a representation of the '*nobility of the human condition*'. At least, that's what the monks from the islands say. Their strange religion has never made sense to me.

I step away from the tapestry and back into the tunnel, looking left to toward the open cavern where the dragon brought me, then right to the ever-darkening tunnel as it winds through the mountain. I step hesitantly in the darker direction, peering into the shadows.

"There has to be an exit," I sigh, walking slowly, dragging my hand across the left wall as I edge deeper into the darkness. I listen carefully for any sign of the wolves but hear nothing. I pass several more rooms filled with treasure and knickknacks, some lay empty, as if waiting to be filled. The cracks in the ceiling become fewer, the deeper I go, but a strange light dances across the floor ahead. I swish my mouth to the side, hurrying forward to inspect it and find another room.

This one is much more simple than the last bedroom I found. A torch on the wall throws light on the bed. It's low to the ground and covered by a thin blanket, quite the opposite of the opulent chamber I found myself in at the beginning of my excursion. I cross to the torch on the wall, noticing it looks crooked. Maybe this one is—

When I pull on the wooden base, it comes free from its shackle on the wall. A grin stretches my face as I rush back out into the tunnel, hurrying deeper into the mountain in search of my escape.

I don't know where the dragon went, but I can't imagine she'll be gone for long. Not when she has a prisoner here to look after.

The tunnel splits once and I veer right, following it until it splits again. I groan quietly to myself as I cast the torchlight first one direction and then other. "I'm going to get lost in here," I sigh over the soft rumble of my stomach. I'm starving.

I haven't eaten a bite since I was brought here. I'm not entirely sure there *is* food here. Perhaps I'll ask the dragon when she gets back. With a sigh, I turn around walk into something soft. I jerk back, trying to catch my balance as I scream, brandishing the torch like a weapon.

"Ahhh!" I yell, stumbling back. Her hand flies out at lightning speed, landing on my shoulder to right me and I scream again. Her eyes go wide as she jerks her hand back, clearly shocked by my reaction. The torchlight illuminates her soft brown features in the dark. A thin, straight nose, high cheek bones, and almond shaped eyes greet me as I throw my free hand over my chest to calm my racing heart.

"Who the bleeding hell are *you*?" I gasp, shaking my head.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Niressa

As I step from the curtain of water, I grab a bath-sheet and wrap myself, wringing my hair out onto the stone floor. Steam rises from my skin as the water evaporates, my inner fire making short work of the droplets that cling to my skin. When I take a step toward my clothing stash, I notice the shimmering pink gown the princess was wearing when I brought her here.

I bend down, pick up the pile of fabric, and run my fingers over the sparkling material. It's beautiful. Every small bit of light that hits it refracts in every direction, drawing my gaze. It's one of the things I first noticed about her in the throng in Vanir. The dress looked stunning, at least the way she wore it.

I fold it carefully then pull my own clothes on. After I slide the leggings over my hips, I adjust my tunic and pick up the sparkling pile of cloth. Tucking it close to my chest, my nostrils flare. It smells like her.

Something about the princess just smells *right*, like a field after a rainstorm in the spring. Wet, blooming flowers, gasping for breath after the thunder passes. I shake my head, dislodging those ridiculous thoughts. The girl smells like a *human* and that's all. She smells good because I'm a predator and she's prey—it's simple biology.

I clear my throat and quickly make my way across the hall into my bedchamber, tucking the beautiful dress away somewhere safe. It bothers

me, deeply, that she discarded it on the floor the way she did. How can humans treat such beautiful things so carelessly? As if they don't matter?

"She's spoiled," I decide as I grab an extra set of sheets and a spare blanket, making my way farther down the tunnel to the bedroom that was once my own. It's smaller than the one I sleep in now, by far. But then, it was meant to be a child's room, so that makes sense.

As I tuck the sheet around the mattress, I swallow the emotion that comes with that memory. I'd grown up here in this mountain with my parents. They claimed this nest centuries ago, before they ever decided to have a child. The room I claim now used to be theirs. Memories of my mother's smiling face pass across my vision and I blink away the emotion her memory brings. I've always looked just like her, if a tad more pale. I can almost hear my father chiding me for bringing a human to the nest, as if he were still here.

"Niressa," he'd say, if he could. "*She's dangerous. Take her home, child.*" And part of me wants to do just that. I want to return her. I've never been a violent person, not really. I defend myself, I protect my home, but I've never attacked anyone who wasn't threatening me or hadn't wronged me in some unforgiveable way.

I learned many things, being raised by my parents. They governed the dragonkin of Lazoreat. They came from two opposing clans and two opposing ideologies, but somehow, they found love in one another. They found mates.

I pull the blanket up and slide a pillow onto the bed, sighing. This had been a happy home, once. My parents ruled the dragonkin like they ruled this home: with peace and pride, balancing their ideologies as they balanced one another. They were two very different dragons who came together to make one strangely blended child. And they were the same in politics.

They agreed on nothing but compromised on everything and so the dragonkin followed them. Until the great golden dragons rose to power, claiming they were descended from an ancient bloodline long since thought to be extinct.

My blood runs cold as images of the golden scaled imposters flash through my mind. The promise of power—like any glittering jewel—is something that all dragons are easily lured in by.

“It’s no wonder you fell out of favor,” I sigh to the empty room. We lived peacefully for a time, on the outskirts of our community. We kept to ourselves, here in the nest, until an attack on a human village prompted Father to speak out against the golden dragons and their brutal policies.

It wasn’t long after that when I came home from a flight and found the nest full of ash. I never even got the chance to say goodbye or burn their pyres myself. Rage heats my blood, my inner fire sparking as my emotions rolls from one end of the spectrum to the other. I hate that I could never *prove* what happened.

Everyone knows. But without actual proof, no one is willing to do anything about it. I was going to . . . once.

I should have killed her when I had the chance.

With a silent shake of my head, I dismiss that useless thought, and turn and inspect the rest of the room. I want to make sure it’s at least somewhat in order for the girl. She *is* a person after all, even if she’s human. She shouldn’t have to be grossly uncomfortable while she’s here, waiting for her father to see reason.

A sound pricks my ears and my pulse quickens even as my lip snarls back—a bad habit from years of solitude. I can hear the princess fumbling down the tunnel. Quickly, I make my way into the hallway, hiding amongst the shadows along the wall as Taryn draws near.

I’m not used to sharing my space with anyone anymore. I’ve been alone since my parents were murdered. I could have rejoined the dragonkin, but I don’t want their company. I still haven’t healed from their betrayal.

I watch silently as the princess moves into the room. A few moments go by and I tense as the sound of wood grating on metal meets my ears. My eyes narrow when she comes into the tunnel carrying the torch that lit the space. I must not have secured it to the wall well enough.

For fuck’s sake.

I press my body as flat as I can to the stone behind me, letting the shadows envelope me as she passes down the corridor, and then I fall in line behind her. My footsteps are silent—this is my home, I know where to step and how to hunt quietly, of course.

But I have to see where she’s going. With the torch in hand, she may very well find her way out of here. And while I’d like to make her stay as

comfortable as captivity *can be*, I meant the words I spoke to the mage. I will not part with her until what's rightfully mine is returned to me.

As I follow her through the darkness, a few things become clear: she has no idea what she's doing or how to find her way out of this mountain, and she is unbearably cute when frustrated. The small huffs and groans of aggravation as she takes another twist, another turn through the tunnels amuse me to no end.

I find it harder and harder not to chuckle as she bumps into small rocks and jumps at the sound of them skidding away from her. She's so easily excitable. And that *squeak* sound she makes is incredibly endearing, somehow.

Until finally—suddenly—she whirls around and nearly clobbers me with the torch. I throw my hands out to steady to her, to keep her from falling or worse, taking me down with her, only to be met with more fear.

“Ahh!” she screams, brandishing the small bit of fire like it's a weapon. I look down at the flames with indignation then back to her wide blue eyes. Even in this low light, I can see her features as clear as if we were outside in the sun. There are a few perks to being a dragon, after all.

“Who are you?” she shrieks, covering her chest with her free hand as she stumbles backward a step.

“Calm yourself,” I hiss, shaking my head. Her cheeks flush a shade of pink that could rival the dress I admired earlier, and I take a steadying breath, forcing myself to ignore it. “You'll give yourself a fit.”

“Who *are* you?” she repeats.

“I'm—” My tongue stumbles over itself, ending in a knot as I search for the appropriate answer. She can't find out what I am. Humans aren't trustworthy with such valuable information and my kind is far too vulnerable in our human skin for them to know the secret of our duality. “I'm Niressa,” I finally answer truthfully.

“I'm Taryn,” she murmurs, taking a step forward. “Are you a prisoner here?”

My eyebrow arches and I shake my head. “No. Come with me, I'll take you back the main cavern.” Princess Taryn of Vanir sighs, her shoulders slumping in defeat as if that wasn't the answer she wanted. But she moves to my side and we make our way through the tunnel. The light of the torch dances eerily along the walls, casting shadows that cause even my skin to

crawl. I much prefer the tunnels without light. The shadows can't play at the corners of your vision if there's no light feeding their fury.

"I appreciate you helping me find my way back, Ni—Niressa? Is that right?"

"Yes," I answer as we pass the bathing chamber. "Niressa. You pronounced it properly, princess."

"That's good. I'd hate to offend. As I was saying, I appreciate your help, but I'd much prefer you help me find the exit than deliver me back to the beast."

"Oh?" I chuckle, shaking my head. "I'm afraid I can't help with that."

Taryn sighs, nodding her head beside me as we step into the main cavern. "What are you doing here?"

I sidestep around a bit of fallen treasure and resist the urge to right it. Though my nest looks chaotic to the untrained eye, there is a very specific system at play here—one that soothes my nature and brings me peace.

"I live here, of course," I reply without thinking.

"With the dragon?"

"Yes, with the dragon," I smirk, trying not to give anything away. I can't let this little human find out my secret. She'd surely use it against me—and I know her father would use the information against all dragonkin—and I can't allow that to happen.

Only dragons' most trusted allies ever find out the truth about our nature.

"Are you her—" she stumbles over her words and I pause to look at her, curious what she's so scared to ask me.

"Her what?"

"Owner? Sorceress? Friend? I don't know the word for it," she admits, her cheeks flushing brighter with each word she rambles.

I snort, shaking my head. "Dragons cannot be owned, princess. No one should be owned."

"I agree," she mutters quietly, and I look at her again, pausing on her blue eyes for a moment before I walk us toward the ledge to take a seat near the wall.

She seems very curious about who I am and what I'm doing here. Letting her catch me in this form was a mistake, but there's nothing I can do about that now. All I can do is try and protect the secrets of my kind.

Even most sorcerers don't know the truth of dragonkin nature. Those who know have proven to either be very strong allies or threats that needed to be eliminated quickly.

I gesture for Taryn to sit down, praying silently to the Gods that I don't have to make that decision with her. I truly mean the human no ill will. I just refuse to be wronged.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I arch my brow, following the strange woman's lead. *Niressa*, she said her name was. She has that easy beauty some girls are blessed with upon birth—the ones who could never comb their hair and still manage to look *effortlessly* beautiful.

I currently look like some sort of deranged forest creature, I'm sure. I washed my hair in the strange bathing chamber and cleaned my body thoroughly, but my hair dried in strange clumps of waves down my back. As if the thought reminds me, I pull my hair over my shoulder, running my fingers through it as I study *Niressa*.

"What?" she asks, her voice thick.

"Nothing," I answer quickly.

"Hmm," *Niressa* smirks before rising to her feet. "You must be hungry. I'll go get us some food."

"There's food here?" I scoff, watching her closely as she steps around me.

"Of course, there's food. What do you think we eat?"

"Prisoners?" I mutter under my breath.

Niressa laughs as she makes her way into the tunnel but there's no way she could have heard my whisper across the cavern. I shake my head, finger combing my hair until it looks somewhat presentable—or worse, depending on my luck—and pull the dagger from my hip, laying it carefully beside me. The damned thing keeps digging into my skin and I'm a *little* scared I'll accidentally stab myself.

As I watch a hawk dart by the mouth of the cavern, the sound of footsteps rings out behind me and I turn over my shoulder to find Niressa with her arms wrapped around a basket.

She sets it down and sits cross legged across from me, digging through the contents of the basket until she finds what she wants. When she hands me a strip of meat and a large cube of cheese, my mouth waters.

“Thank you,” I whisper, taking a greedy bite of the meat, my eyes rolling shut.

“Gods, slow down,” she laughs, watching me with her strange bright eyes. I tilt my head, trying to get a better look at them in the light. They’re *pink*, and far too shiny to be normal—even if pink eyes were normal.

Which they’re not.

I narrow my eyes on the beautiful woman, inching my hand toward the dagger. “So, you’re not the dragon’s prisoner, or her owner. Who are you? Why do you live here with her?”

“What are you asking?”

“Why are your eyes pink? Are you a sorceress?” My mind drifts to Ona’s strange bright eyes. Hers are silver, like gathering rain clouds lit up by lightning, but magic is magic. And these eyes are too similar to those of the dragon for there not to be some sort of connection . . .

“No, I’m no sorceress, princess,” she laughs.

“How do you know who I am?” I ask as it dawns on me that she’s been referring to me as ‘princess’ this entire time. I never told her my title. Did the dragon tell her?

“Taryn isn’t a very common name,” she points out, her eyes dropping to where my hand rests near the blade. “Of course, I know who you are. Even so far away from the castle, we know the names of its current inhabitants.”

“You’re playing games with me,” I huff, taking another bite of meat. I don’t *think* she means me any harm. But she’s clearly also lying to me, and I’m not sure why she would bother.

“Maybe,” she admits.

“So, you just . . . live here,” I drawl out, taking a bite of cheese next. Niressa hands me a flask and I take it, careful to avoid her touch. If she’s a sorceress, I don’t want to be influenced by her magic. I hardly trust Ona and I grew up around the woman.

“Yes.”

“Because . . .”

“It suits me,” she shrugs, smirking as she bites down on her own dried meat. “You’re very curious, princess.”

“I am,” I admit, my eyes grazing over her clothing, searching for weapons.

“Be at ease,” she laughs. “I mean you no ill will, Taryn of Vanir. I’m simply here, offering food.”

“But why? Are you *friends* with the dragon?”

“In a way,” she answers slowly, canting her head to the side.

“But you say you’re not a sorceress.”

“I’m not,” she laughs, shaking her head. Her long curls fall over her face and I find myself wanting to touch them. I’ve never seen hair like hers up close. The curls are so tightly sprung, I wonder if I pulled one if it’d bounce.

“Then how did you manage to befriend the beast?” I ask as I close the flask and hand it back.

“You shouldn’t speak about her like that,” she chuckles, her eyes crinkling as she smiles. “She will get offended.” Her chiding tone grates my nerves and I straighten my spine as I lay the food down on my leg.

“I don’t *care* if I offend her,” I snap. “She kidnapped me. And while she feels vindicated, apparently, because someone loyal to my father stole something from this cave, I am not a thing to be taken or traded. I’m a person.” In my agitation, I sweep my hair up into a knot, tying it around itself until it’s secure on top of my head. “And, to be completely fair, the thing that was taken from her belonged to *my* family first. She’s the thief. She simply stole the crown so long ago, it *feels* like hers. Greedy dragons.”

As I open my mouth to launch into yet another spiel about the greed and ridiculousness of this particular dragon, Niressa’s eyes go round and she shakes her head.

“Don’t do it. Don’t shake your head like you’re about to defend her. You’ve been kind, thank you for the food. But I won’t listen to anyone defend my mother’s murderer.”

“If she says she didn’t kill her, then she didn’t.”

I blow out an exasperated breath, standing to my feet to pace. Sitting still when I’m aggravated has never been easy and I’m *furious*. I’m annoyed that I’m essentially trapped here. I’m furious my father put me in

this predicament by stirring up the dragons in the first place. *Who is stupid enough to trifle with dragons?* Godfrey of Vanir, that's who.

I'm offended that the beautiful woman in front of me thinks I'm some idiotic child who can't see her for what she is: a sorceress. And I'm particularly seething over the fact that she thinks it's alright to defend her friend, my kidnapper and probably the beast who murdered my mother, to *me*.

"How could you *possibly* know that?" I hiss, my fingernails digging into my palms as my fists clench at my sides. The dagger glints on the cavern floor, along with the half-eaten cube of cheese that fell from my lap when I stood up.

Niressa takes a deep breath and rises to her own feet before looking over her shoulder at the sunlight outside the cavern. "Come, princess. Let's show you to your room so you can get some rest."

"How do you *know*?" I ask again when she starts walking away from me, toward the tunnel.

"I know her as well as I know myself. She's not an infallible creature, but if she says she didn't kill your mother, then she didn't. You have no power in this situation, what reason does she have to lie to you?"

My mouth falls open as I watch her disappear into the tunnel. Standing here, fuming in the middle of the cavern, I realize she might be right. What reason does the dragon have to lie to me?

I shake my head and bend to pick up the dagger, only to find it missing. I narrow my eyes on the tunnel as I jog toward the opening. Niressa stands farther down, past the bathing chamber, in front of the room I took the torch from. When I draw close to her, she smiles warmly at me and enters the room.

"There's a blanket and a pillow. It's not much, but it should keep you comfortable enough until your father sees reason."

"Even if she isn't the great murderess I think she is, she still kidnapped me for something that is not my fault," I huff as I step around the tall beauty. Her hand snakes out, grabbing me by the wrist.

My eyes fall first to her hand, so warm against my skin, then slowly rise to meet her own strangely pigmented eyes. "Hmm," she murmurs, her nostrils flaring as her thumb strokes my skin. I'm not proud of the goosebumps that small touch leaves behind. I don't want to be attracted to this woman. She's involved with the beast who kidnapped me, the one who

somehow had my mother's crown in her possession—even if she claims she didn't kill her.

Niressa's tongue darts out to wet her lips before dropping her hold on me.

"I'm not stupid, you know," I whisper as I quickly pull the dagger from her belt and throw it on the bed behind me, trying to ignore the heat between us. "I know you're bound to the dragon somehow, sorceress. Your eyes give it away."

Niressa flashes me a brilliant grin and shrugs before leaving the room, not speaking a word on the subject either way.

I throw myself on the bed and pull the pillow over my face, screaming into the soft down stuffing. Why am I so frustrated that Niressa doesn't seem to understand where I'm coming from? It shouldn't matter to me. She's the enemy, too. She's here of her own free will, so she may as well be one of my captors.

I groan, pushing the pillow off my face. Staring up at the cavern ceiling, I mutter obscenities to myself over and over. "Why are you so upset?" I ask myself quietly. "She owes you nothing."

I don't have an answer.

I wish Mira was here to tell me how silly and emotional I'm being. She's much better at dealing with adversity than I am, it would seem. I've never seen her melt under the scrutiny of the court, and there's been quite a bit over the years.

Rumors swirled for some time after we became close that she was my lover. She took those rumors in stride and proclaimed, quite proudly to anyone who would listen, that, "*The princess couldn't handle me as a lover, so I've decided to keep her as just a friend. It would be improper for me to steal all of her attention, wouldn't it?*"

I still can't believe she said that in the middle of feast. Father looked like he might die of embarrassment and Lady Sheffield nearly fainted. Lord Sheffield simply laughed with me as the rest of the court stared in awe of the bold statement.

Mira would know exactly why I'm so pissed off that this woman is lying to me, even though I hardly know her. Even though she doesn't owe me any loyalty or the truth.

And Mira would say it. Bluntly. Because that's who she is.

I sigh, rolling onto my side as I wonder what my friends are doing. Did she and Dary have that talk I told her to have? When I get home—if I ever get home—will I find her married to the Prince of Tabistak?

And why do I care about any of that right now when I'm being held hostage in a mountain?

I roll my eyes shut, determined to quiet my mind. As the darkness behind my lids closes in around me, lulling me to a soft sleep, images dance across my vision.

The rose and teal dragon flying across the sky.

A beautiful woman with almond skin and pink eyes, smiling at me over a fire.

My mother's eyes, staring out at me from beneath her crown.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



As I exit the bathing chamber, still pulling a comb through my cold, wet hair, I hear the echo of voices drifting down the tunnel. As I get closer to the main cavern, more warm air hits me, easing the chill from my damp hair.

“The king will acquiesce. You will hold up your end of the bargain?” I peek out from the edge of the tunnel, staring at the profile of a shrouded figure. Strange smoke clings around her body, swirling in a menacing fashion. The long white hair, edged with moonlight peeking out from the edges of the cloak-hood gives me hope: Ona!

“I’m true to my word, witch. Which is more than I can say for your kind.” The dragon snorts a puff of smoke toward the mage and narrows her eyes, her agitation with this conversation clear.

“Sorcerers are—”

“I meant humans,” she growls, getting much too close to the woman for my comfort. Ona is going to get herself killed. She’s a powerful mage, supposedly, but is she any match for a beast such as that?

The mage sweeps her cloak around her, her hood falling back as she tilts her head up at the dragon. Before she speaks whatever vitriol she clearly has in mind—I can tell, after all these years of being the recipient of such vile words—she disappears in a cloud of smoke.

Gasping, I cover my mouth. I’ve never seen such magic performed before. Sure, I know it exists. But Ona only ever practices the most subtle, trivial magic at court. Like the lights during the jubilee.

The dragon swings her great head around over her back and faces me, her nostrils flaring. I jump backward, my other hand holding my stomach as it lurches from the quick movement.

“How nice of you to grace me with your presence,” she growls in a voice that sounds almost amused. The early morning light glints off her scales, highlighting the two-tone shade as she moves further away from me, closer to the ledge.

“I was sleeping,” I retort as I step into the cavern, carefully picking my way around some fallen treasure. “There was a woman—she showed me to a bedchamber I could sleep in while you were gone. Did you think I escaped?”

“No,” the dragon outright laughs. “I don’t think you could find your way out of my mountain.”

I narrow my eyes and cross my arms over my chest. I don’t like how sure she is of herself. She’s sassy for a magical creature. Though, I’ve never met a dragon before her . . . perhaps they all have an attitude.

“While you were spying, did you hear your father will be trading my treasure for your return?”

“Yes,” I sigh, defeated. “But I wasn’t spying.”

“Good,” she huffs. “And yes, you were.”

“Who is Niressa?” I ask, ignoring her goading as I make my way closer to her, into the sunlight. The heat of the light soaks into my hair and I close my eyes, letting the warmth move through me, saturate my bones.

“She lives here,” the dragon answers in a measured tone. My left eye pops open to find her staring at me and a shudder wracks my spine before I quickly shut it again, absorbing the heat of the sun. It’s cool deeper in the mountain.

“Yes, that much I’ve gathered. But who is she? Where did you meet your sorceress friend?”

“Why do you care who she is?” the dragon asks then heat erupts between us and my eyes fly open. On the stone floor, a fire rages, and I quickly kneel beside it, rubbing my hands together. “Are you cold, Tiny Treasure?”

Ignoring her last question, I instead answer the first. “I worry for her. She’s a beautiful woman living here alone with a dragon. It seems dangerous.”

“YOU THINK I’D HARM AN INNOCENT WOMAN?” SHE SCOFFS, HER WINGS ruffling at her side as she moves nearer.

“My mother—”

“I have never killed anyone who didn’t first attack me,” she sighs as she sinks to the ground, laying her head across her large claws. “It’s sad you cannot see the truth in front of you, princess.”

“She is very beautiful,” I try again. “Have you been friends long?”

“I’ve known Niressa for as long as I’ve known myself,” she chuckles, steam rolling from her mouth with the movement. My head tilts to the side as the familiarity of those words slam into me. They must have been friends for a very long time indeed . . .

“She said she isn’t a sorceress.”

“She isn’t.”

“Then why is she here, with you? And why do her eyes speak of magic? And where is she now? I didn’t see her in that room—”

“You’re very curious about her for someone who is going to be leaving soon, Tiny Treasure,” the dragon murmurs as her eyes slide shut.

“She’s captivating,” I admit quietly, my cheeks heating with embarrassment at admitting such a thing. I pride myself on knowing my lovers, but apparently, the moment I meet a beautiful woman I’m as guilty of obsessing over them as a man would be. It’s shameful.

“I think you should worry more about the hearts of those around you than their pretty appearances, princess. You’ll save yourself lots of pain that way.”

I bite my lip, pondering that response. The dragon sounds . . . jealous? Does Niressa belong to her in some way? I keep accusing Niressa of being a sorceress and the dragon her familiar, but perhaps it’s the other way around. Perhaps Niressa is some sort of pet to this beast.

For a moment, I imagine the dragon as a jealous lover but my cheeks quickly flame at the thought. How would they—

“Hopefully, I’ll be out of your way soon,” I mutter. “I can go home and see what’s left of the jubilee. One of my dear friends is supposed to be getting married,” I sigh.

“Marriage is a strange concept,” the dragon admits.

“How so? Do dragons not take partners?”

“We take mates,” she answers hesitantly. “But it goes beyond professing temporary love or lust. A mate is something you feel in your

heart. It cannot be changed, once accepted. It leaves a mark on your soul, changes the very fabric of your being.”

“That sounds very . . . intense.”

“It would be, for a human, I’m sure. But it’s our way. We don’t take such things lightly. Some dragons never mate by choice. It’s such a commitment, to have your life twined with someone else’s for the rest of your time here on this earth.”

“That’s very romantic of you,” I snicker, combing my fingers through my hair. It’s nearly dry after sitting by the fire.

“Our kind are older than yours and so technically, I’m sure I know more about romance than you do, Tiny Treasure.”

“I’m not your treasure,” I reply quickly, rolling my eyes. “You’ll be getting your treasure back soon, then I can leave and go back to my life. The way it should be.”

“Hmm,” she rumbles. “And what will your life be like once you leave this mountain? You said your friend is getting married, what about you? What are your plans?”

I ponder that for a moment, sliding my feet toward the flames. I’m no longer cold but the warmth of the fire is alluring.

“I won’t be getting married. Not anytime soon, or ever, possibly. I’ll be in meetings with my father and his cabinet, learning how to run the kingdom. I’m much more concerned with the future of Vanir—”

“You don’t want to marry? You’re that committed to being a dedicated ruler?”

“Well,” I begin, ducking her piercing gaze. “I keep holding out hope that my father will remarry and provide a new heir I can abdicate to, when the time comes.”

“Why would you do such a thing?” she scoffs, raising her head up, bending her long neck over the fire until her large snout is merely inches from my face.

“If I follow my heart and stay true to who I really am, I’ll never provide my kingdom an heir. My family’s rule will end with me. It would be better if I had a sibling I could abdicate to, or at least who can provide heirs of their own to rule when my time here is past.”

“Ahhh,” she chuckles, her head bobbing as the noise passes her lips and she retreats back over the fire, curling her head up onto her claws

again. “That’s why you’re so worried for the woman, Niressa. You’re a sapphic.”

A strangled noise claws its way up my throat and my cheeks heat as I nod my head quickly. Why does it feel like she’s mocking me? And why does she care?

“Well, Tiny Treasure, there have been rulers who never bred an heir. You wouldn’t be the first.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever heard of King Lende?” she asks, the scales along her mouth rippling as she . . . smiles. Is she smiling? Can dragons smile?

“No,” I admit. “What kingdom did he rule?”

“All of them,” Niressa chuffs, shaking her head side to side. “Before Lazoreat was split by the war that ravaged your mother’s ancestors, King Lende ruled Lazoreat. His family was in power for generations. He suffered a grave injury in battle that left him sterile and unable to produce an heir.” She looked me square in the eye as she continued. “His wife abandoned him, claiming he was stealing her youth with no promise of a legacy. He never remarried. He, instead, adopted an orphan from one of the villages near his kingdom. A common boy with no title, no inheritance, no nobility—”

“What did his people say?” I gasped.

“They loved him for his kindness. He raised the boy as his own. The people adored him for valuing commoners enough to accept one as his son, as his heir.”

The dragon’s tail whips around the fire and points at me. “That boy is your ancestor. The Lazoras family was born from that child and his heirs, and their heirs. You are your own legacy, Taryn of Vanir. Live your life in a way that makes your enemies quake with fear and your loved ones cry with happiness. You deserve that. We all do.”

My heart aches, as if those words broke it open and tears threaten to spill from the corner of my eyes. It’s true that my father has never been anything but supportive of me. He has never demanded I date a man, not since he learned I’m sapphic, at least.

He called off a rather beneficial wedding alliance simply to make sure I could live my life to my own version of happiness. But I have never let myself off the hook for my obligations to my kingdom, the obligations that my very nature prevents me from fulfilling.

This beast. This . . . being . . . just absolved me of every guilt and worry I've ever had about my rule as eventual queen. I don't have words for that.

"Would that work?" I wonder aloud. I didn't even realize I spoke the words out loud until the dragon chuckles.

"If you accept it, in time, your people will as well."

I swat away the dragon's tail and roll my eyes. "That's a pretty fairy story, dragon. But I'm meant to rule over very real people. They could rebel."

"Then you handle the rebellion as rulers always have."

"How's that?"

The dragon snots flame from her nostrils, her voice taking on a deadly tone. "With fire."

Goosebumps break out across the back of my neck, rushing down my arms as I stare at her. There's something more to this creature. She understands far more than she should.

"There are wolves in your cave," I suddenly say, with absolutely no reason. I just need to break up the heavy weight pressing this moment so deeply into my memory.

"They wander into the mountain sometimes, seeking shelter. Usually when they have pups to raise." With that, her tail winds around me, pulling me around the fire until I'm closer to her. "Stay close and they won't bother you."

"Would you care if they did?"

"Yes."

"Why?" I ask, honestly curious as I lean my head back against her thick hide.

"Because if anything happens to you, how will I get back my treasure?" she scoffs.

I snort and smack my hand against her large leg, the closest part to me as I laugh. This bloody dragon is joking about my *life*, for Gods' sake. A momentary pang of fear zips through my chest as I realize I just struck a *dragon*, and not just any dragon, the one whose holding me captive.

I twist my head slowly to look her in the eye—the one I can see from this angle anyway—but find nothing but amusement. The way her belly shakes behind me as she laughs at my assault is only further proof that she isn't offended.

My lips purse as I wonder where Niressa is. I'm starting see how she can view the beast as a friend; she's far more wise than I thought possible.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I pull the long blouse over my head, twisting and turning to look at myself in the mirror. The leather tights fit me well enough—though they’re a little tight—but I’d prefer to have a dress if I’m going home. But even after searching through the piles of Niressa’s clothing, I couldn’t find a single dress.

Perhaps she’s against the institution. Some women don’t like them, or refuse to wear them simply because it’s expected. I can respect that mentality, to be honest.

I don’t like doing anything I’m forced to. I never have.

Be that as it may, I have to admit, I look rather fierce in tights. As I pull my hair over my shoulder, a fresh round of excitement zings through me. The dragon said my father should arrive at the mountain today to make the trade and take me home.

And while my captivity hasn’t been abusive or even all that scary, I miss my home and my friends. I don’t belong in a secluded mountain with a dragon. I belong in Vanir, learning to rule my people. And I cannot wait to speak to my father about the story of King Lende. I wonder if he knows of it and how he will react to my plan to adopt an heir if it comes to that.

The idea has lifted a weight from my shoulders, one I didn’t realize weighed me down quite so much. Though, I suppose that’s the way it is with burdens: you never know how heavy they were until you’re no longer suffocated by them.

If Father approves of my idea and I can somehow document his approval, then it will be easy enough to convince the rest of our kingdom to follow his lead when I take the throne. Though, I hope that day is very far away, I have to plan for it. Every day, my father grows older, and with each breath he takes, I am one step closer to having to fulfill my responsibility to my people.

A low growl in the tunnel catches my ear and I step out, brandishing the dagger I stole from the dragon's hoard of weapons. I shudder as I remember how many there were, how many she must have killed to amass such a collection. As I move down the corridor, the growl becomes more clear. It's the dragon. I sigh, slipping the dagger into my belt and move into the main cavern, narrowing my eyes on her.

"You sound so disgruntled, beast," I laugh. "Something wrong?"

"They're at the base of the mountain," she murmurs, stretching out her wing. "Come."

"I couldn't find my dress," I sigh.

"If you want it, it's in the sleeping chamber you mentioned, folded amongst the others. I like the shining fabrics . . . but I won't steal it from you." Her large pink eye dilates the slightest bit as she looks at me and I quickly shake my head, holding up my hand.

"No. No, that's fine. If you like it, you can keep it. You've been kind, in a way. Or at the very least, you haven't been cruel. Thank you for that."

The dragon nods, huffing some steam from her nostrils before shaking her wing again. "Climb up here, now. We'll fly down. I don't want your father's people in my caves ever again, Tiny Treasure."

I scurry to the edge of her wing, my heart pounding in my ears as I grip onto a large spike I find there. Carefully, I walk across the thick bones lining her wing, careful not to step on the leathery material she relies on to fly. After a few moments—and only a few near-falls—I find myself sitting on the back of a *dragon*. Inching my hips forward, I settle at the base of her neck, wrapping my arms around the thick neck in front of me.

She twists around to peer at me and I swear, for a moment, it looks like she smiles. "Hold on tight, Tiny Treasure," she chuckles before leaping over the edge. My stomach flies into my chest as I hold onto her neck, a scream of delight flying from my lips when her wings spread, and we start to glide on the wind.

"Did you think we'd fall?" she asks over her shoulder.

“I couldn’t think at all,” I admit, pressing the side of my face into her scales as the wind whips around us. It’s exhilarating, riding a dragon. It’s not something I ever *dreamed* of doing, much less enjoying. I love the feel of the air splitting around us, the way her body rises and falls beneath me with each flap of her wings.

I wish I’d been able to speak to Niressa before I left. There’s something about the sorceress that calls to me. Perhaps that’s the secret, perhaps it’s her magic that calls to me. It would make sense, in a foul sort of way. But it’s also probably for the best that I didn’t get the opportunity to grow attached to her. She’s important to the dragon, somehow. I wouldn’t want to disrupt whatever strange relationship the two of them have.

And what place could I offer a sorceress, anyway? Vanir already has a mage. With a wistful sigh, I lean back from the dragon’s neck, peering out at the party waiting for us.

She lands on the ground with a heavy thud, raising her head high to look down at the men gathered around us. My father is nowhere to be seen and a sinking feeling fills my stomach; he should be here, bartering for my return. It’s a sign of ill will, a slight, and I’m sure the dragon notices. When I move my leg, preparing to dismount, she growls low in her throat and shakes her head.

She won’t let me get down yet.

Dary’s eyes meet mine from his horse and my heart surges toward him. I’m so close to going back home, so close to returning to my version of normal and getting on with my life.

Father’s general, a man named Wythecliff, dismounts his horse and approaches us slowly. In his hands, he holds something wrapped in cloth. Carefully, he unfolds the cloth and lays his offering in the grass before backing away in quite the rush.

The dragon snorts, her neck twisting in an odd angle as she brings her face low to look at the crown. As I look at the gift, all the glittering jewels along the crown catch my eye. It’s beautiful. Pink and blue stones alternate in swirling patterns across the metal, but it’s not my mother’s crown.

“This is not my treasure,” she huffs, rearing back. My grip on her neck slips as she jostles me around and I see Dary lean forward on instinct before gripping the horn of his saddle, clenching his jaw.

“It’s the same,” Wythecliff stutters. “The king sends it with his best wishes. He understands why you must love the colors—”

The dragon roars her agitation, spewing flame down on the offering until it’s nothing more than a pile of melted metal. The jewels melt last, popping and sizzling where they mix into the strange pool of liquid gold.

“It is not my treasure. You insult me. Your king insults me.” Her body rumbles beneath me as she growls at the men before us. “Leave while you still can.”

“Give us the princess,” Dary calls out from the group even as Wythecliff stumbles backward toward his horse.

“She will be returned when I’m given what’s mine.”

My heart beats a war song against my breast. My freedom lies just a few feet away, waiting for me. My idiotic father has pissed the beast off, now, and while I believe her to be a kind creature . . . she’s still a dragon and cares more for her treasure than anything else.

If they anger her, she may never let me leave.

I have to go while I can.

That thought tumbles through my mind like a leaf blown on the wind, crashing into everything on its descent to the ground. I release my hold on her neck and scramble to dismount. My feet nearly slip across the bumpy scales along her spine when she twists her neck around to face me, smoke pouring from her nostrils as she speaks.

“Do not try my patience, Treasure,” she growls, her eyes narrowing. Her wings spread out just as the sound of weapons being drawn meets my ears. I hang on tight, my pulse roaring in my ears so loud I can no longer hear the sound of metal sliding across metal.

“Release the princess!” Someone shouts and the dragon beats her wings, lifting off the ground. The heat from her scales intensifies, bordering on uncomfortable as I cling to her for dear life. I know there’s a fire building in her chest.

“Fools,” the dragon snarls as she beats her wings, bringing us higher into the air. I peer down at my would-be rescuers, frantic to find a solution. Perhaps I can reason with her.

But before I can try, a large, strange looking arrow soars through the air toward us. Metal glints in the sun and I yell, trying to warn the dragon before it’s too late.

“Look out!” I screech, beating on her scales with my fists. Her head whips round too late, the arrow slamming into her chest.

The dragon roars, her wings faltering for a moment and my stomach lurches. Fire spills from her mouth as her claws dig into the mountainside, rocks falling below us as she hangs on. She beats her wings again, painful snarls following each movement as she raises us up toward the ledge.

Finally, her claws grip the ledge and she pulls herself into the cavern. I scramble down from her back, rushing away from the ledge. My hand covers my heart, feeling the beat pounding against my palm through my chest.

The dragon turns, her side rising and falling with each labored breath and spews fire from the ledge, down at my rescue party.

“Dary!” I hiss, rushing toward her. As I reach the ledge, my heart sinks. I can’t see through all the smoke billowing up from the ground. I may as well be looking into the dark tunnel behind me. I turn around, prepared to screech at the dragon for what she’s done.

She could have killed one of my dearest friends!

But instead, my eyes fall on the large arrow protruding from her chest and my heart sinks again. They attacked first. She was simply returning to her mountain.

The dragon isn’t to blame, I realize as I take a hesitant step near her. “Will you be alright? What can I do to help?”

“Vanir has done enough,” she snaps, twisting her neck to bite at the arrow. She misses time and time again.

“Let me,” I whisper, moving closer. Something tells me I should be very afraid of an injured dragon. Even injured dogs and cats can be vicious. Something this size? Something with this much power? She could incinerate me without even meaning to. Animals lash out when they’re hurt.

So do humans, I remind myself as I take another step toward her.

The arrow is strange. It’s metal, all the way through, from what I can tell. Perhaps that’s why it pierced the dragon’s hide so easily. “I’m going to remove it,” I whisper, staring up into one of her large pink eyes.

“It will—” before she can finish her sentence, I wrap my hand around the arrow and pull with all my might. The sick sound of flesh tearing as the barbs pull backwards through the skin twists my stomach.

“Arghh!” the dragon roars, rearing back on her hind legs. Between that and my own weight pulling on the arrow, it finally slips free. I fall backward, my ass hitting the stone floor as she screeches her pain and fury toward the ceiling. Fire falls from her nostrils and several short burst of fire char the rock above us.

Blood pours from the wound, coating the stone at her feet. My eyes widen as the dragon’s scales begin to shimmer with a strange light.

“Dragon, are you al—”

“I’m fine,” she growls as she stumbles forward. When her front claws hit the ground, she sways from side to side. I scramble backward, scared she might fall on me if I don’t move. She takes one last step before her scales shimmer again and her form shifts. She shrinks before my eyes even as she falls over, her scales receding into perfect almond colored skin. My eyes go wide as Niressa’s head hits the ground and I rush forward.

“Oh Gods,” I murmur, pressing my hand to the open wound above her breast. Blood quickly seeps through my fingers, panic surging through my chest as I glance around for something that will help. With only treasure and weapons in sight, I blow out a shaky breath and pull the blouse over my head I press it to her skin, applying as much pressure as I can.

Sweat beads on her forehead and a strangled noise dies in the back of my throat. “Fuck!” I whimper, glancing around the room again for something I can use to help her.

Treasure. Gold. More gold. Swords. Other weapons.

Fire pit.

Fire pit!

I can cauterize the wound. Dary’s father loves telling the story about how he had to do something similar to his favorite knight when he was gouged by a wild boar. It was the only thing that saved the man’s life.

It takes some maneuvering, but I manage to wrap the shirt around her chest and pin it beneath her body, keeping some modicum of pressure on the wound as I scurry away to grab what I need.

I take off down the tunnel, running as fast as I can. The torch in my bedchamber is the only one not seared to the wall, I remember. I slide through the entrance and pull it down, then rush back the way I came. I run my finger along a pile of treasure, searching for the sword I *know* I saw

before. When my finger finds the hilt, I pull it free, my heart pounding in my chest.

She's going to die. I just know she's going to die. I didn't think dragons were so easily killed, but I also didn't know they could turn into *women*. So, what do I know, really? They could be anything, at this point, and I wouldn't be shocked.

I hold the edge of the blade in the flame as I walk back to where she lays, her long curly hair spilling across the stone floor around her. The blouse is already soaked with blood.

Swallowing hard, I watch as the tip of the sword begins to glow from the heat and my anxiety spikes. I have no idea how her biology works. She can wield fire, though, so at the very least . . . this shouldn't be detrimental.

Sitting the torch down, I struggle to keep the tip of the sword in the flame as I undo makeshift bandage around Niressa's chest.

"Gods, help me. Help her," I mutter as I look at the gaping wound the strange arrow left behind. Before I can talk myself out of it, I plunge the piping hot sword into her the wound, careful not to go too deep and close my eyes.

The sound of flesh sizzling meets my ears, but no screaming. Is she dead? I pull the sword free, and watch, praying her chest is still rising and falling with breath.

It is.

One look at the wound tells me I'm not done with my work yet. I grimace as I repeat the process, reheating the sword until it's glowing red again. I press the blade flat over the wound to seal it and wince as the sizzling of skin fills the air again.

I can't even process the stench.

If I focus on it, I'll be sick. I know it. When I'm satisfied the wound is sealed, I throw the sword down and lean back on my hands, staring down at the sorceress—or dragon—with my eyebrows cinched together.

"You can change into a woman. Or you can change into a dragon?" I muse out loud, knowing full well she can't hear me. Pressing my palm to her forehead, I check her temperature. She feels cool to the touch and that doesn't seem right for a dragon, at all. I glance at the torch where it sits beside us and groan.

“I have no idea how to care for you,” I admit as I cast another glance at the woman laying on the cold stone floor. Her bare breasts rise and fall with each breath she takes and somewhere amidst my worry, I find it hard not to notice the beautiful contrast of her nipples against her skin. Whatever deep sleep she’s in, it doesn’t seem like she’s going to wake anytime soon. “Please don’t die,” I whisper, watching her passive face as she sleeps. I don’t know why it’s so important.

She’s kidnapped me.

Lied to me.

She’s not even human . . . but . . . she was also kind to me. In both of her forms, she took the time to make sure I was alright, to encourage me, to make sure my needs were met while I’m here.

It’s a strange thing but I feel . . . beholden to her somehow.

I scrunch my nose up and hurry back down the tunnel to find a blanket to cover her with. As much as I enjoy the view of her lying there naked, she needs to be warmer. She needs to be *much* warmer. When she grabbed my hand before, it felt like she might burn me. The fact that she feels as cool as ice now can’t be a good sign.

Rifling through her room, I manage to find two blankets and a soft down pillow. As I carry them out into the cavern, I’m struck again by how beautiful she is laid out on the ground. The curve of her hips has me rolling my eyes heavenward for patience as I tuck the blankets around her, then slide the pillow beneath her head.

My fingers comb through her curls as I stare down at her for a moment, wondering if she will make it, wondering if all dragons can change forms, wondering why I’ve never heard of such a thing before now.

I find myself also wondering if the reason I find myself drawn to her is because of the magic she wields. If she can change forms from woman to dragon, what else can she do? I sigh, stepping away from the sleeping beauty and start working on building a fire to keep her warm.

I’ll never get the answers to my questions if she dies.

Yes, the voice of my subconscious murmurs in my mind, *that’s why I want to make sure she’s alright. My curiosity.*

That’s the only reason.

My eyes slide back to her sleeping form, wrapped tightly in the blankets. Even beneath them, her curves are obvious. I sigh, praying again

for patience as I touch the torch to the wood I've gathered and watch it slowly catch flame.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Niressa

I roll over toward the heat source, yawning sleepily as my eyes slowly flutter open. A small fire burns on the ground beside me. I reach toward it, to touch the flames and bring more of that precious heat inside me, but a sharp pain draws me up short.

They attacked.

I sit up straight, ignoring the searing pain in my chest that the quick movement causes. My head turns from side to side, glancing to make sure there are no soldiers or knights waiting in my nest. I glance down at my chest, thin strips of cotton—from one of my blouses, I think—wrapped around it like a bandage. I remove those, craning my neck to see the damage.

A fresh burn mark covers what should be at least half of a hole in my chest. I brush my fingers over the raised skin as my eyes fall to the princess where she lays on the ground nearby. I peel apart my blankets and wrap one around myself, before laying the other across Taryn. She rolls toward my hand in her sleep and my heart clenches in my chest. I brush a stray strand of hair from her face, tucking it back behind her ear. Her smooth skin feels like silk beneath my fingers and I shake my head.

Why did she stay?

I must have shifted from the blood loss. I cringe as I stare down at her, my heart beating in my chest—my very sore chest. She knows I have two

forms. *Oh, Gods.*

My eyes widen as I rear back, pulling the blanket about my naked shoulders. I move closer to the fire, letting it soak into my bones as I ponder the situation.

Humans aren't supposed to know about our shifting capabilities. The old dragons would be furious if they found out. I wince at the thought, putting it from my mind. They would want her murdered and I just—I shake my head even as my stomach twists. Despite what the girl thinks of me, despite what she thinks I've done, I'm no murderer. I've only ever killed in self-defense. I would never harm her unless she harmed me first . . . and even then, I'm not so sure I could do it.

Not now.

Not after she saved me. Not after she stayed.

My fingers graze over the wound on my chest again. It's healing. It will take more time than most wounds, because of its proximity to my weakness. I shudder as I realize just how close the king's men had come to ending me today.

And that begs the question . . .

Why did she stay? She could have fled when I passed out. I wouldn't have blamed her. This situation is hardly fair to the princess, after all. I'm owed what I'm owed, but she's just a vessel I'm using to get what I want. Her presence here has been an inconvenience to her, traumatic even, perhaps.

Her kind can be so delicate—especially the royal ones.

She could have found her way out of the mountain, eventually. As she shifts in her sleep again, digging her face into the pillow beneath her head, I tilt my head to the side. Perhaps the little sapphic isn't as bad as her father. She stayed. She mended me as well as she could and she stayed, not only here in the mountain, but beside me on the floor.

I blow a bit of flame onto the fire that keeps her warm as I stand to my feet. When I'm sure the heat is enough to keep her comfortable, I move toward the ledge, peering down at the scorched earth below. Aside from the burned grass and a few dead horses, there's no sign of the humans. They must have lived, then.

What a shame. They deserve whatever death finds them for putting her in danger like that. If I had fallen—

I narrow my eyes, swallowing those thoughts. They attacked *me*. They deserve whatever death finds them for daring to disrespect me, when I have been more than upfront with Vanir about my terms.

And the fact that the king would authorize such a senseless attack when I have his daughter as a hostage *enrages* me. I don't mean Taryn any harm, but *he* doesn't know that. For all he knows, I could have burned her to ash by now as recompense for all he's done.

First, they took my treasure.

Then, they attack me during a peaceful exchange.

A snarl slips from my lips and I take a seat on the ledge, my feet dangling over a I watch the sky turn colors. The sun is setting on this horrid day, at least there's that.

Perhaps the king won't send the crown. My heart lurches forward at the thought. Perhaps I'll get to keep the strange princess for a while longer. She's intriguing, to the say the least. And the fact that she stayed . . . something about that makes me want to keep her closer, now.

A small growl rumbles my chest as I dismiss that troublesome thought. I can't keep the princess. She's not a *thing*, like she said. She's not one of my treasures . . . even if it's easy to compare her to them.

The sound of footsteps echoing behind me sends a spark of adrenaline through me and I glance over my shoulder to find Taryn yawning sleepily as she makes her way to the ledge.

"Thank you," I murmur as she takes a seat beside me, her feet dangling over the ledge next to mine.

"I'm not sure I helped," she shrugs. "I thought I killed you and then you—" she waves her hands at me in some vague explanation of the thought she can't seem to finish. "You're her. You, obviously, I mean," she mutters, rubbing her temple in frustration.

I nod my head and she blows out a shaky breath before leaning forward. When she pulls the blanket aside, her cheeks flame pink and I have the strangest urge to feel how warm her skin is where it blushes.

"You—" she chuckles as she brushes her fingers over the wound, inspecting it. A shiver winds its way up my spine and my eyes slide a little more shut as her fingers dance across my skin.

The touch is innocent enough, but the heat growing in my belly refuses to acknowledge that.

"Aren't you cold? You're not dressed."

“I have the blanket,” I chuckled as a cool wind whips around the mountain and past us. “Besides, my fire keeps me warm, Tiny Treasure.”

“Mmm,” she muses. “Why did you let me think you were two different people?”

“I never pretended to be anyone I’m not,” I correct her. “Though, I suppose, I did mislead you.”

“How can you be a woman and a dragon?” she asks, running her fingers through her hair. “And how is it your wound seems nearly healed?”

“We heal faster than your kind, princess,” I murmur, adjusting the blanket to hide my bare chest from her view. “We have always kept the duality of our nature a secret from your kind,” I sigh. “You have a tendency to abuse the information if you find it out.”

“What do you mean?”

“And—” I chuckle, holding up a hand to pause her rapid-fire questions. “Only the outside is healing quite so fast. I’m still very much injured. If you’d like to make your escape, now’s the time.”

“How have we abused the information?” she asks again. The fading light makes her eyes look more lavender than blue and I find myself focusing on them as I tell her truth. Something I rarely do, at least in whole.

“There have been kings and queens who had alliances with us. Each of them abused the power that gave them and tried to exterminate or enslave the dragonkin.” I smile at her, licking my teeth as I watch her mouth drop in horror. “It never worked in their favor, though.”

Taryn closes her mouth with a click of her teeth, peering down at the burnt ground below us. “I’m sorry they wounded you.”

“You’re not responsible for them, your—”

“But one day, I will be. For now, my father is the one to blame. I’m disappointed in everything that happened today,” she whispers. My eyebrows cinch together as I study her. The sincerity of her words is sobering.

“Why is he so slow to part with my treasure?” I ask her, honestly curious. It seems like a simple thing to provide in exchange for one’s only child.

“Probably for the same reason you are,” she answers carefully.

“What do you mean?”

Taryn sighs, turning to face me. Her left leg folds and her right leg still swings over the ledge. It makes me nervous to see her so close to the abyss below. I'm not entirely confident I could shift fast enough to save her, right now. I don't *want* to shift at all. The tender parts of my chest need to heal more before I attempt it.

"For him, it's the thing that personifies my mother's memory. That crown holds her seal—something that was very against tradition, mind you. When a woman marries a king, she takes his family crest as her own. But my mother," Taryn chuckles. "She was never one to stand on the back of tradition. She felt her family's crest deserved to remain as integral to her life as it was during her raising—"

"As it should. Her line is older than his," I point out.

"Yes," Taryn smiles, tucking some of her hair behind her ear. And I can't help but notice how beautiful she is like this, relaxed, with a smile on her face. "She felt the same way. So, on their wedding day, when my father was meant to crown her as his queen, he unwrapped that crown—much to his surprise. He'd commissioned something far different. But Mother, the feisty troublemaker she was, cancelled his commission and had her own design made instead."

"With the teal rose."

"With the teal rose," she laughs, nodding her head. "It was quite the scandal. They say everyone at court gossiped about it for years until they realized she wasn't going to relent." Her eyes go soft as she looks out over the mountains around us. "Father says that was when he knew it was a true love match, not just a convenient pairing."

I lick my lips, nodding. Taryn blushes and I tilt my head to the side, wondering what caused her cheeks to flush like that again. "What is it?"

"How do you change between woman and dragon? Doesn't it hurt?"

"Not usually, no. It would hurt if I shifted right now," I murmur, gesturing to the wound on my chest. "It's a strange thing. Like stretching all at once, but it's not painful. Shifting back is even easier. I just . . . disappear into myself, I suppose."

"That's incredible," she murmurs, bringing her knee up and resting her chin on it. "I can't imagine."

"Well, it certainly isn't for everyone," I chuckle, winking.

"I think it's amazing. I knew there was a connection between you and the dragon though. I told her—you, I mean—as much," she rushes out, as

if she just realized she's won some argument.

"Yes, yes, you're very bright," I mutter, rolling my eyes. "Why did you stay, though?"

Taryn scrunches her nose up. "What do you mean?"

"When I fell unconscious, you could have left. But you stayed."

"You were wounded, Niressa," she mutters, waving her hand as if dismissing the entire concept. "I couldn't leave you there to bleed out on the floor."

"You could have. Easily," I whisper, reaching for her hand. She shudders at my touch and I wonder for a moment if she's frightened by me, or repulsed. The way her eyes track my movements tells me otherwise, though. I lace my fingers through hers and squeeze. "Thank you."

Taryn stares at where our hands are joined together, her thumb brushing back and forth across my thumb. Another shiver courses through me with every little circle she draws across my flesh. It shouldn't feel so good to be touched so simply.

"Well," she coughs, finally squeezing my hand in return. "When I saw you were the woman I met, I knew I had to get answers. I couldn't just let you die, despite what you think. It's not in me."

"You're good, Taryn of Vanir," I murmur quietly. When her blue eyes meet mine, I can see myself reflected in them.

"I want to be," she whispers back, before breaking the intimate moment and staring out into the distance.

I want to ask her who told her she isn't. And every violent part of me wants to shred whoever it was to pieces. My eyes widen as that instinct grows stronger and I quickly drop her hand, readjusting the blanket before I stand to go get dressed.

I need to be careful, before I'm unwilling to part with the princess at all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I cross my legs, leaning on one hand while I grab the skewer of meat with the other. “What is this?” I ask suspiciously as I twirl the stick, trying to get a better look at the meat in the torchlight.

“Rabbit,” Niressa answers around a mouthful of meat. “Try it.”

I scrunch my nose up, biting the first piece carefully. The texture feels . . . far too chewy to be fully cooked. I spit the meat out in my hand and raise my eyebrow at her. As I hold the rare meat out, she shrugs.

“I can’t eat uncooked meat, Niressa,” I sigh.

“It’s cooked,” she growls.

“It’s red in the center.”

“That’s where all the flavor is, princess.” She takes another bite of her own meal and I wait, holding the rare meat on my palm with a scowl on my face. Reluctantly, Niressa reaches for my skewer and takes it. Before I can ask what she means to do with it, she blows a small bit of flame.

The smell of sizzling meat makes my mouth water, but *seeing* her wield flames in her human form is even more distracting.

“How—”

“Dragon,” she interrupts, handing the stick of meat back with a grin. I purse my lips against the million questions I want to ask her. I know I’ve asked too many since I found out what she is. But it’s hard for me to wrap my mind around it.

I’ve accepted she can change forms between dragon and human, but I had no idea she could breathe fire in this form. How does it not burn

through her throat?

“Well,” I murmur before taking a small, cautious bite of the meat. “Can you use other parts of your other self when you’re in this form?”

“What do you mean?” Niressa asks, leaning over on her elbow. My eyes fall down the curve of her side. Her bare hip draws my eye where her shirt has ridden up, clinging to her ribs. I swallow, dragging my eyes back to her face. The smile I find waiting for me there tells me she knows exactly how beautiful she is like this.

“You can breathe fire like this. Can you produce a pair of wings and fly? Or a tail?”

Niressa’s lips curve into a wicked smile as her tongue darts out to wet her lips. “What would you want a tail for, princess?”

My eyes roll shut as the implications of that question reverberate through my core. Is she . . . flirting with me? “Can you?”

“No,” she laughs, taking another bite of her food. “I’m sure you’re very disappointed.”

I shake my head, willing my cheeks not to show my embarrassment. “Tricky dragon,” I mutter, laying my skewer down on the plate. Niressa’s laughter fills the room but her eyes don’t look amused. The pink jewels glow with an entirely different emotion.

“I never trick anyone,” she purrs. “I only take what is already mine.”

“Oh?”

Niressa leans forward, reaching a hand out to my cheek. My face turns into her palm of its own volition while she swipes her thumb down the corner of my mouth. She’s so warm. It’s when she pulls her hand back and licks the evidence of my meal from her own finger, I hiss in a breath.

“Yes,” she murmurs. Her eyes slide down from mine and no matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to convince myself to stop imagining what it is she sees that she likes so much.

“Your skin is always so warm,” I blurt out.

“The inner fire,” she chuckles raising up and stretching her arms over her head. “It’s always present, even when I’m not using it. But it comes in handy, especially for times like this.”

“Like this?”

“There’s a storm coming.” Niressa’s head cants to the side in a very animal like way, and suddenly I wonder how I didn’t realize she was the

dragon before. There's something feral about her, something *other* that should have stood out immediately.

But I suppose we only see what we want to see.

"It never storms this time of year," I scoff.

"But there is one coming," Niressa sighs. "Why do you continuously doubt me?"

"Because there are never storms this time of year." I watch as Niressa rolls her eyes and stretches out on the bed, crossing her ankles as she drums her fingers on her stomach. "What will happen now?" I ask.

"Well, I suppose your father will send his mage again to negotiate on his behalf. Hopefully, that comes with some sort of apology." The snarl in her throat sends a shudder down my spine. I'm not scared of Niressa, not really. But I know what sort of violence she's capable of. I've seen the proof of it in her cave. I've seen it in the way she so easily threatened the entire kingdom during the jubilee.

"I doubt that," I whisper. "When it comes to Mother, he's—"

Niressa's nostrils flare as she holds up her hand, effectively silencing me. My head rears back, my eyebrows shooting up my forehead at the rude behavior.

Before I can ask her what's wrong, her pupils turn to slits, her lip curling back in a feral snarl. In a moment, Niressa is off the bed and out in the tunnel, sprinting toward the main cavern. I scramble off the bed and follow after her, my heart pounding in my ears.

Anything that can make her react that way can't be good. I've seen her rage, I've seen her be shot, but I've never seen her *scared*.

I follow as quickly as I can, but I can't keep up. As I reach the edge of the tunnel, Niressa is already in the center of the cavern. The large rose and teal dragon bursts from her body just as a large brilliant, golden dragon lands on the ledge. Its claws dig into the stone floor, scoring it as it perches precariously on the edge, its wings spread out on either side of it.

"Why are you here?" Niressa hisses, taking a step forward, her massive tail whipping behind her. Even as big as she is, the golden dragon peering into the cavern is larger, at least twice as large.

"Send the princess home, Niressa."

"Get out of my nest," she snaps, fire spewing from her nostrils as she speaks.

"I cannot allow this idiocy to continue. You jeopardize everything my clan has worked generations for." The golden dragon's voice is deep, much deeper than Niressa's. It's a male. His eyes graze over Niressa's head and slam into mine. Even from this distance, I can see the golden orbs as they sear into me.

"Your clan's business isn't mine. I want only what was taken from me."

"Return her," the golden dragon snarls, lifting one massive foot and then the other, as if he's barely restraining himself from entering the cave. "Before it costs you more than you have to pay."

My eyes fall on the horns sprouting from the dragon's head. They run backward, alongside what I *think* are ears but it's hard to tell on a dragon. He's different than Niressa, a different . . . breed? His scales are brilliant, like gold coins laid across one another to create an intricate piece of armor.

But why does he care if I'm here?

He speaks as if he's in charge, I know that tone. It's the tone my father uses when addressing the nobles in Vanir; the way you speak shows people how to respond to you. And if, for some reason, this golden dragon wants me gone, why isn't Niressa listening to him?

I'm no one to the dragons. I've never even met one before Niressa.

"Do not threaten me in my nest, Aeronel," Niressa hisses, taking another step toward the ledge. "You're lucky you and your *clan* still take breath for what you've—"

"I shouldn't have to threaten you at all, child," he snarls. "You *will* return her. Do not force me to take matters into my own hands." With that, the dragon pulls his lip back in something resembling a smile and falls backward. Seconds pass before a large, golden body flies up past the ledge toward the top of the mountain and I openly gape at Niressa. As I make my way into the cavern, another golden dragon—though, much smaller—follows after it, beating its wings as it soars past the ledge.

Niressa snorts some flame toward the ledge and turns around to face me, her eyes narrowing before her scales start to shimmer. I watch in awe as she shrinks in on herself, her scales receding and giving way to perfect smooth skin.

My eyes fall from her brilliant rose-colored gaze, further down her body. It would seem her clothes get destroyed in the change because she

stands nude before me, her hands fisted at her sides. My core clenches as I trace each of her curves with my eyes. Her breasts rise and fall with each breath, but I can't take my eyes off the perfect, pert little nipples standing at attention at the ends of them.

I want—badly—to wrap my mouth around those little buds and be done with this endless flirtation, but I know better than to do such a thing. I clear my throat, preparing to apologize for ogling her when a drop of blood slides down her chest and rolls across the swelling curve of her breast.

“You’re bleeding,” I hiss, rushing toward her. She looks down at her chest and grimaces while I grab a piece of the clothes she shredded on her way toward the golden dragon. I press the cloth to her wound and purse my lips.

“Thank you,” she mutters, laying her hand over mine, applying pressure to the wound.

“Who was that?”

“Aeronel,” she sighs, shaking her head. “One of the golden dragons.”

“Mm,” I muse, stepping back as she inspects her wound. “Why does he care about me?”

Niressa opens her mouth to speak but quickly clamps it shut, making her way toward the tunnel. I roll my eyes shut as her perfectly round ass sways in front of me on her way out of the room. “His clan rules the dragonkin, now,” she calls over her shoulder.

I shake my head, trying to focus on something other than Niressa’s body. How is she so comfortable being nude? Is she *intentionally* teasing me? For Gods’ sake.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I point out. Though I understand the need for secrecy and the importance of loyalty, something tells me Niressa isn’t truly loyal to that dragon. “Why would he care I’m here? Dragons attack shipments and things all the time, and I’ve never seen any golden dragon intervene to police the situation.”

“Oh? Have you met many dragons, princess?” Niressa asks as I follow her down the tunnel.

“No,” I admit, pausing by the entrance in some effort to offer her privacy. “But I’ve never heard of it, either.”

“They allow what is beneficial to their politics,” Niressa murmurs from inside the room. “Your presence here obviously isn’t.”

I lean my head back against the stone wall, considering that. I had no idea there was such a thing as dragon politics and I have no idea how my presence can possibly affect them. “Am I interfering in some . . .” I struggle to find the word I want, chewing on my lip. “Courtship?”

Niressa strolls from the room, lacing her tights. She grins wide at me and shakes her head. “I’d no sooner mate that dragon than I would a squirrel, Tiny Treasure. He’s a vile creature.”

“Oh,” I squeak. Niressa laughs and turns back toward the main cavern and I follow her. What else am I supposed to do? As we near the end of the tunnel, a brisk, cold wind fills the cavern and I rub my arms together. As we make our way closer to the ledge, I can see why.

“Snow?” I gasp. “Now?”

“I told you there was a storm coming,” Niressa chuckles, pausing by a stack of treasure to rearrange it with the utmost care.

“But snow? It never snows this time of year. The mountains block it all.”

“I’ll start a fire so you can be warm, Taryn. Don’t worry, I won’t let you freeze.” Niressa shakes her head and reaches for my hand. She grabs some wood I didn’t notice with the other and starts leading me back down the tunnel.

“Why do you call me that?” I ask, curious. I’m not a treasure, and I certainly am not tiny.

“I’m not sure,” Niressa admits as we turn into her bedchamber once again. I take a seat on the edge of the bed, rubbing my arms as I watch her build the fire in the floor. She breathes fire across the wood, barely blowing, like a child trying to fog a windowpane so they can vandalize it.

I hold my hands out to the flames, thankful for the heat. The cold air is quickly filling the caves and I’m not dressed for such weather. Niressa moves around, kneeling in front of the bed, in front of *me*, and my eyebrows rocket toward my hairline. She smirks, taking my hands in hers and begins massaging them, warming them with her own heat.

“You’re so warm,” I sigh as my eyes roll shut.

“There is fire in my blood. Of course, I’m warm. You can sleep in here tonight, if you want. The snow will delay anything from your father, I’m sure. The fire will keep you warm.” My eyes open slowly and I nod as my gaze meets Niressa’s where she kneels in front of me.

My core clenches as all the possibilities of that offer tumble through my mind over and over. Niressa's nostrils flare and she bites her lips against a smile before rising to her feet.

Carefully, she climbs onto the bed and pulls the blanket down, patting the soft mattress beside her. "Come lay down," she murmurs. "You're freezing."

I swallow, scurrying further up the bed with much less grace than I wish for. I slip beneath the cover and lay on my side, facing away from her. The nervous breaths sawing in and out of my chest are so loud, I feel like they fill the entire room with noise.

But they stop when a warm arm slips around my side, curling over my waist. Heat floods my body as Niressa pulls me firmly against her chest. I swallow a sigh, wondering if the heat is *her* inner fire or mine.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



My head rolls to the side and I jerk away, just to be pulled firmly against something hot behind me. Tensing for a moment, my eyes roam the stone wall above me.

I'm in Niressa's room, I remember, as I watch the firelight spread strange shadows across the ceiling. Niressa's heat behind me is almost stifling. I'm not sure the fire is even necessary if I'm in her arms, to be honest. My lips curve up in a smirk as I snuggle deeper into the luxurious bedding.

I suppose her greedy nature is good for something, at least. This bed is divine.

Niressa moves in her sleep, her hand sliding over my waist to the curve of my belly. I bite my lip, trying not to move, not to wake her. She blows out a tiny little sigh, a sound that is so unlike the snarling, growling, etherealness she usually shows me, that I have to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from giggling.

She's very affectionate when she's asleep, I realize, as her chin finds the crook of my neck and snuggles in there. Between the heat of her body pressed against mine and her hot breath dancing against my neck and ear, I'm barely able to keep still.

My thighs squeeze together when she moves again, and her lips brush my skin.

For Gods' sake, Taryn, I scold myself. Have some self-control. The woman is sleeping! And that's true enough. It's not like I can hold her

accountable for things she does in her sleep, but Gods if it doesn't feel nice.

I lay there like that for what feels like forever, trying to control my own breathing as her breath tickles my ear. My hips wiggle as I try to stop the aching between my thighs and Niressa lets out a little moan.

My eyes press closed as I swallow, trying to ignore that sound. It's hard to ignore the chemistry brewing between us; I've seen the same desire reflected in her strange eyes. But I shouldn't get involved with her. She's a dragon, for Gods' sakes. There's nothing I can do to change those facts. And she kidnapped me.

I'm becoming one of those princesses they write children's stories about, who falls in love with the knight from a faraway kingdom after he stelas her from the tower. I don't want to be that sort of woman, that sort of princess. I'm not so silly that I'd trade my autonomy for simple affection.

But, even though Niressa *did* kidnap me . . . she's been kind to me, hasn't she? She's made sure I have what I need, and she has gone out of her way to keep me warm during this snowstorm. Still, even if I gave into whatever it is I'm feeling for her, there would be dire consequences. I can't have a dragon in Vanir, and I have no doubts that the greedy nature of a dragon extends to their love life.

Somehow, I know, sex with her would be a commitment, one I'm not sure I can fully agree to.

I blow out a puff of breath, ignoring the pounding in my head that these thoughts bring and slowly edge my way out of the bed. Niressa's arm falls onto the mattress and I glance down at her sleeping body with a small smile.

"Even if I want her, it wouldn't be fair," I whisper to the fire where it dances on the floor. "These feelings will pass." There's nothing I can do about the attraction I feel toward her, though. The slick heat brewing between my legs is proof of that. I shake my head and pad quietly toward the bathing chamber. It's too cold to fully wash, but I can at least clean my most important bits and change my clothing.

Gods, how I miss the warm baths in the castle.



Niressa

I ROLL ONTO MY BACK WHEN THE SOUND OF TARYN'S FOOTSTEPS DRIFT away from my bedchamber. When I woke up, I didn't immediately move because she was already muttering under her breath and my curiosity got the best of me.

"And that's what I get for intruding on someone's private thoughts," I mutter, dragging my hand down my face. She's not alone. Every time her cheeks flush pink, I want to make her blush again. I've been stealing small touches since she found out the truth about what I am. And last night . . .

She didn't need to sleep in my bed. A fire built from dragonfire would have been more than enough heat to keep her warm in her own bed. But I couldn't pass up the opportunity to have her close, to feel her next to me. She didn't object, though, and now I knew why.

"Gods," I sigh, raking my fingers through my hair. I can't get involved with her. She's right, it wouldn't be fair. I don't know why *she* thinks so, and I'm not sure I want to hear her reasoning, but mine is simple enough. Even though the Tiny Treasure wants me, it could only be for a little while. I have to give her back to her kingdom, eventually.

And that's going to be hard. I actually *enjoy* having her in my nest, moving around and making noise, talking my ear off with endless questions about shifting and flight and dragonfire. I huff a surprised chuckle as that realization slams into me full force. I'm used to the isolation of this existence. I prefer it.

Many males are flying around Lazoreat with scars for daring to try to invade my home, for trying to court me, for trying to steal my independence.

But I actually *like* having the princess here.

And that's dangerous, because parting with the things I enjoy isn't something I'm accustomed to, or good at. The way I met Taryn is proof of that. I blink my eyes, staring up at the ceiling for another moment before I swing my feet over the edge of the mattress.

I hope the king never sends the crown.

I go still, banishing that treacherous thought before it can take root. That's selfish greed, something I try my best not to indulge in. But such is my nature . . . and one can only fight their nature for so long before it wins out.

I pad across the hall to the bathing chamber and freeze where I stand when I see Taryn standing there, completely nude. She darts her hand under the cool water and quickly rubs soap under her arms, hissing at the water like it offends it.

I'm not proud of myself for spying, but I also can't help it. Each time she reaches into the water, she squeaks a tiny bit, using the barest amount of water to clean her face. I bite my lip against a chuckle. That sound is cute on her lips. When she reaches in a third time and starts rubbing her hands between her legs, my heartbeat quickens and warmth fills my belly—even more warmth than usual. When her fingers disappear between her thighs, a strangled snarl dies in the back of my throat and her head snaps in my direction.

My eyes meet her icy blue gaze and a shiver shoots down my spine. With water dripping down her perfect breasts to the slight curve of her stomach, her hand between her legs . . . there's nothing I can do but move toward her. Taryn's cheeks flush a dark shade of pink as I near her.

"I—" she mumbles "—I didn't realize you needed the bathing chamber, I'm sorry."

"No need," I murmur, running my hands through the cool water. I let my inner fire warm my palms a little more than usual, warming the water with it before I take the bar of soap from her hands.

Carefully, I lather my hands up and rub them carefully over her hips and across her belly. Taryn's eyes never leave mine and she never objects, though her lips do part with words she doesn't speak. I shudder, the feel of her skin against mine sending jolts of heat to my center.

Fuck. I sink my teeth into the inside of my cheek, trying to control the growl that wants to spill out. This was a bad idea.



Taryn

MY EYES THREATEN TO ROLL SHUT AS THE WARMTH OF HER HANDS SLIDING over my body envelopes me. The woman is smooth, I'll give her that. I know she's tempting me, daring me to do something. It's almost embarrassing to be bathed by her—and it shouldn't be. I'm used to maids helping with my baths, some of them I'm even used to having in my bed after. Or before. Or during.

But this feels particularly intimate.

Niressa's bright pink eyes bore into mine, as if searing the memories of the other women away as she lathers up my body, inch by inch. When her hands slide down to my upper thigh, my eyes roll shut and a quiet moan slips free.

Niressa's fingers grip the flesh of my thigh, kneading it. I bite my lip as she growls, her fingers coming closer and closer to the bend of my thigh, to the what we both know is waiting between them . . .

When her palm slides over my mound, my hips writhe toward her hand and she growls. A shiver winds up my spine, forcing my eyes open. Niressa slides her free hand across my cheek, lacing her fingers in the hair behind my ear as she peers at me with those jewel-like eyes.

"Tiny Treasure," she murmurs.

"Yes?" I ask, my breath stuttering in and out of my lips as she holds me there, staring into my eyes like she might find the answer to some question I don't even know.

"I'm going to kiss you," she whispers, her tongue darting out to wet her lips as her eyes fall to mine. She quickly glances back up to me as her teeth sink into her perfectly plump bottom lip. "You shouldn't let me."

I blink, tilting my head to the side, making sure I heard her correctly. "Why not?"

The flat of her palm slides down my mound, pressing against my lower lips without slipping between them. It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to grind down against her hand, to beg her to really touch me.

"It's unwise," she murmurs, backing me up a step. Her fingers leave my hair as she braces herself on the wall behind me. Heat pours from her body and the room quickly fills with steam. Niressa pushes me back against the wall, warm water pouring down into my hair and across shoulders and back.

“Wh—why?” I whimper as my head meets the hard stone. Her mouth covers my ear, her tongue darting out to lick the earlobe as she replies.

“We both know why,” she growls, grinding her palm against my pussy. Somehow the pressure reaches my clit and a sigh parts my lips as my hands slip around her neck. My fingers thread through her hair as I nod my head.

“You’re right,” I sigh, arching my back as her fingers slowly slide between my lips, dragging through the wet heat waiting for her there.

“Mm,” she snarls, a shudder curving her spine. “Then you’ll stop me, yes?”

My fingertips trace a path down her scalp to the base of her neck before my palms find her jaw. Pulling her face to mine, away from my ear, I stare up into Niressa’s eyes and shake my head. Water drips down my forehead and in the moment my eyes close to clear my vision, her lips press against mine.

Whatever I thought a dragon would taste like . . . I was wrong. Niressa’s lips move over mine like warm honey and taste like sugared fruit. I’ve never tasted anything so decadent, so sweet. My grip around her neck tightens as I tilt my head to the side to deepen the kiss. When my tongue parts her lips, a growl vibrates her chest where it presses against mine. Her free hand leaves the wall, sliding down my neck, my shoulder, grazing over my breast before falling to my hip.

She grips my thigh and pulls my leg around her own hip, her teeth grazing my bottom lip as her thumb slowly circles my clit. “This is what you want, Tiny Treasure?” she murmurs against my mouth, teasing her fingertips in and out of my core, just enough for me to feel the pressure, to chase it with my hips.

“Yes,” I whimper, arching my back away from the wall as I try to bring her inside me.

“Mmm,” she growls, leaning back to look in my eyes as she slips two fingers into my core. My fingers score her arm as she pushes in and out of me, her thumb never relenting on my clit.

“I—”

“Yes?” Niressa snarls and I swear for a moment her teeth look sharper than normal.

I shake my head, trying to think through the pressure building in my core. The steam around us has created a dense fog and it’s as if we’re

somewhere else. A different place. A different time, maybe.

“It feels so good,” I choke out, sliding my hand to her breast. As my thumb rolls over the sensitive nub waiting for me, Niressa works another finger into my pussy, stretching me, pushing me higher. “Oh!”

“That’s it,” she moans, slamming in and out of me in a slow, deliberate pace. Her fingers curl against that precious spot just inside, that place that’s missed so easily.

I whimper, turning my face up into the water. So many sensations.

Her fingers in my pussy, her thumb on my clit, the water cascading down my body. *The heat.*

Pressure rises in my core, my hips grinding against her hand of their own volition. Niressa slips her free hand into my hair and tugs—just hard enough to force my neck to bend—until her lips crash down on mine.

The kiss is *hunger* given physical form. It’s passion and heat personified. It’s . . . everything. My breath stutters as her tongue slips over mine, massaging me just as thoroughly as her fingers massage my g-spot.

My pussy spasms around her, clamping down. “Oh!” I whimper.

“That’s it,” she purrs, never releasing her hold in my hair, forcing me to look her in the eyes as waves of pleasure surge inside me. I dig my fingers into her shoulder, begging silently for the completion I crave.

Goosebumps break out over my skin when she brushes her thumb over my clit in the *opposite* direction. So strange how such a small change in sensation can—

“Oh Gods!” I cry out, my nails scoring her shoulder, trying to hold on as I fall over the edge of oblivion. My heart pounds against my chest, my eyes squeezing shut as my pussy spasms around her fingers. When my head falls back again, I sigh as the small waves pleasure lap at my body.

Niressa slows her thrusts inside me, slowly working her fingers out of my core. I open my eyes to stare up at her, my fingers immediately finding her thick, curly hair. My lips pluck at hers slowly as shivers wind their way around my spine. An aftershock bursts through my core, heat searing into my abdomen and my knees start to give way.

Niressa’s arms circle me, holding me close to her chest as she chuckles. “Careful, Tiny Treasure. Don’t fall.”

I shake my head, biting back the retort that wants to slip past my lips. *It might be too late for that.* I regain my footing and start to bend down, brushing my lips over Niressa’s chest as I sink to my knees.

But before I can stoop down, a finger under my chin has me standing back up. Slowly. “What are you doing?” she asks.

“I want to taste you,” I murmur, licking my lips.

Niressa’s nostrils flare even as her eyes roll shut but she shakes her head. “You can’t.”

“What? Why?”

“Because, Tiny Treasure,” she chuckles, pressing soft kisses across the bridge of my nose. “I’m a dragon. I can only be expected to give up so much. If you . . . I might not be able to part with you.”

Those words should terrify me. That’s precisely why I told myself not to get involved with her at all. But, instead, a warmth that has nothing to do with the steam around us—or the orgasm still tingling between my legs—spreads through my chest, rooting itself somewhere deep inside me.

Maybe, that wouldn’t be so bad after all.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



I watch as Niressa makes her way up through the tunnel. She's lighting small fires in each room, to keep the caverns warmer for me. While her heat combined with the fire kept her bedchamber very warm, the snowstorm turned into something more closely resembling a blizzard sometime this morning.

I wrap the ends of the thick sweater around my hands as I walk toward the ledge. Even though the air is frigid, the snow is *beautiful*. My eyes wander over the tops of the trees, heavy with large clumps of white, to the snowflakes still falling much faster than I could have ever anticipated.

A set of warm arms come around me and I sigh, leaning my head back against Niressa's chest as she holds me.

"You look so enchanted by it," she murmurs against my hair.

"I don't get to see snow often, and I've never seen it like this," I whisper, waving my hand toward the large fluffy flakes as they swirl through the air then add to the inches accumulating on the ground below. Small patches of snow cling to the edge of the ledge where we stand, and I bend down, grabbing a handful and pack it into a tight ball.

"What are you doing?" Niressa growls. I turn around to face her, my lips curving into a wicked smile as I watch her eyes widen. "Taryn—"

Smack!

The snowball hits her square in the face, little puffs of steam rising where it meets the heat of her skin. She narrows her eyes on me, one slender hand gripping her hip. "Treasure," she growls.

“Yes?” I squeak, taking a step back, away from her, deeper into the cavern.

“Did you *hit* me?” she asks, taking a slow step forward.

“Um—” I scramble across the stone floor as fast as I can, but I’m not nearly fast enough. I should have known better, really. Niressa is a *predator*, I couldn’t possibly outrun her. When her arms wrap around me from behind, I turn around to face her and quickly press my lips to hers.

“Mmm, don’t think you can kiss your way out of this,” she chuckles, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face. “Troublesome human.”

“Beastly dragon,” I shoot back with a grin.

Niressa rolls her eyes, swiping some of the water that hasn’t evaporated from her skin away. “*Why* would you throw snow at me?” she asks, exasperated.

“It’s fun,” I giggle. “Like a game.”

“Throwing snow at another person is a game? Humans are so strange,” she murmurs, shaking her head. I reach forward, brushing some snow from her curls with a smile on my face.

“I haven’t played in the snow since I was a child, when my mother was still alive,” I whisper.

Niressa’s eyes rivet to mine, her expression pained. She looks *guilty*. I believe her when she says she didn’t kill my mother, but the look on her face tells me she knows more than she’s let on.

Dragon politics, I lament silently.

“Well, we could always—” Before Niressa can finish her sentence, a cloud of smoke erupts from the floor. I stagger back from it, even as Niressa crosses her arms over her chest.

Within moments, the mage steps from the smoke, her cloak swirling about her feet. Ona looks first from Niressa to me, then narrows her eyes. “Princess!” she exclaims, laying a hand across her chest. “I’m glad to see you are well. Where is the dragon?”

“I’ll fetch her,” Niressa murmurs before turning to me. Her eyes widen, a silent plea for my silence written there. I can tell she’s worried I’ll tell the mage too much, that I’ll expose her.

In that moment, I realize she hasn’t asked me to keep the information to myself. Not outright. She hasn’t made any demands of me when it comes to the secrets I’ve discovered since being here. I would never expose her . . . even before what happened in the bathing chamber . . . I

clear my throat as my cheeks flush and Niressa makes her way toward the tunnel.

“Are you alright, child?” Ona asks, drawing my attention back to her. Smoke flows from her long white hair and I shudder, realizing she looks like more of a demon than a sorceress like this. “You look well and cozy for someone being held captive by a dragon.”

“The girl has been caring for me,” I rush out. It’s true. Ona’s eyebrow raises and I switch the subject before she can pry too deeply. “Has Father decided against trying to insult the beast?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest. I really am annoyed with him for pulling such an idiotic stunt. “He could have gotten me killed.”

“He regrets trying to bribe her with a replacement,” Ona sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “The men barely made it back with their lives.”

“Is Dary alright?”

The mage nods, looking at me as if she can see *through* me. I find myself wondering—not for the first time—if she can. I have no idea what the extent of her magic is, or how much she can truly see. If she can read minds, or emotions, influence actions—all of those are well within the scope of possibility for someone who wields magic.

“Prince Dary was unharmed—”

“Have you come to apologize for your king?” the dragon snaps as she enters the room, her large claws clicking across the stone floor as she walks toward us. Fire falls from Niressa’s nostrils as she speaks, and Ona goes rigid.

“What happened was . . . a regrettable mistake,” she answers carefully. No doubt, my father is somewhere nearby in the castle, listening to this exchange.

“Regrettable, yes,” Niressa growls as she moves closer, her tail curving around my feet at the floor. The mage’s eyes fall to the gesture and she tilts her head to face the dragon head on.

“It would pain Vanir greatly to lose our only heir, and the king would be heartbroken to lose his child after already losing his wife—”

“Which I had nothing to do with,” Niressa snaps, a throaty growl spilling behind the words.

“Perhaps,” Ona purrs as she nods her head respectfully. “But the crown will be returned to you, dragon. As soon as the snow clears, someone will

bring it to you.”

“Let us hope so,” Niressa snaps.

Ona narrows her eyes then disappears in another puff of smoke. Niressa beats her wings, sending the smoke curdling out over the ledge as she walks toward it, shaking her head.

“Do you trust her?” she asks as she lays down on the edge of the stone, still in her dragon form.

My head tilts to the side as I take in how beautiful she actually is like this. Her pink and teal scales shine against the bright white of the snowstorm. Flurries fall on her, immediately melting under the heat she produces. I shake my own head as I make my way toward her, settling down against her large flank, my fingers brushing over her armored flesh.

“Ona is a sly old woman,” I laugh. “I don’t trust the mage at all. Why do you care so much for the crown, really?” My arms stretch over my head as I lean into her like a giant, scaly pillow. “And don’t lie to me this time.”

“I’ve not lied to you, Taryn,” Niressa murmurs quietly. The sincerity in her voice draws my gaze and I find her large pink eyes staring back at me over her muzzle.

“Half-truths are just as bad,” I smile sadly. “I want the truth. Why do you care so much for my mother’s crown?”

Niressa huffs out a puff of steam before pressing her large muzzle to my stomach, pushing me against her side. Her wing comes down around me like a blanket and I smile, thankful for the added warmth. “It’s not a story that paints me in the best light, princess.”

“I’d still like to hear it.”

“Alright,” she sighs, curving her neck around to lay on her claws. She glances away for a moment, as if summoning the courage to start. “My parents ruled the dragonkin, once. My mother and father were very different dragons. They fell on opposite ends of the political spectrum, too, as it were. And during a time of chaos amongst our people, they fought side by side to bring some sort of civility to these mountains.”

“Civility?”

“There was a great war, though I’m sure the humans didn’t understand what was happening. Entire clans went extinct. The fighting was reckless and wholly unnecessary. That was the one thing my parents agreed on. And somehow, that bloomed into a mating.” Niressa sighs, her eyes rolling shut for a moment. “Centuries later, they had me. We lived here in this

mountain, and they ruled over the dragonkin together. Two very different halves of the same coin, as it were. The perfect balance.”

Niressa’s eyes open, her too-large, slanted pupils boring into me as she speaks. “Until the return of the golden dragons.”

“The one who came here?” I ask, leaning forward.

“Yes,” she answers, her nostrils flaring. “Him and his sister, the last of the golden dragons, or so they claimed.” She rolls her eyes and I bite my lip against a chuckle. She’s majestic like this, in this form, and yet—she’s still very much herself.

“They come from a line of dragonkin long thought to be extinct. When they came to our mountains, some dragonkin thought it to be a sign. From the Gods,” she scoffs. “They were beautiful and manipulative. They knew precisely what sort of clout their coloring brought them, and they played that well. Eventually, my parents no longer governed our kind. Instead, the golden dragons ruled the mountains.”

My heart aches for her. Displacement like that is never easy. And for a child—

“We stayed here, in our mountain, away from the politics. My mother and father hoped that one day the rest of our kind would see reason again, but they knew they couldn’t do anything as long as the dragonkin believed the golden dragons were sent by the Gods.”

“Sent by the Gods? That sounds silly,” I admitted, running my fingers through my tousled hair.

“Oh?” Niressa laughs. “Humans believe such silly lies quite often, don’t they?”

“I—” I bite my lip, realizing she’s right. Several kings have stood on the back of religion, claiming they were ordained by God in order to secure their place on the throne. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Mmm,” she purrs. “But, eventually, Aeronel’s greed became evident. They were attacking humans, isolating trade routes, causing chaos amongst the people of Lazoreat. One day, my father spoke up again. He had to, he said. He pleaded with the dragonkin to see reason, to see that this was wrong. We’d been at peace for so long—” Niressa’s voice strangles.

“I came home not long after that, after a flight one day. I found this entire cave full of scorch marks and ash. I never got to light my parents’ pyres. I never got to say goodbye. But I knew who was responsible.”

“The golden dragon,” I gasp, my fingers digging into her hide. “The one who was here?” My voice inches up an octave as my stomach curdles with rage and fear.

“Yes. Aeronel and his sister. It was a particularly hard betrayal for me. Anaka was someone I thought could be my mate back then,” Niressa whispers, pulling her wing closer around me. “I was wrong.”

My heart speeds up in my chest. Someone she was seeing had a hand in her family’s murder? That . . . there aren’t words for that kind of hurt. How could she do that to her? “I’m so sorry,” I murmur, shaking my head. “That’s cruel.”

“Such is political intrigue, I suppose.”

“Hmm,” I muse. “I don’t think it’s a normal part of it, no. But what does this have to do with my mother’s crown?”

Niressa nods her large head. “I was enraged. I wanted vengeance and blood and fire and death and everything that would never fill the hole in my heart,” she whispered. “I went looking for them, the golden dragons. I found them flying between two mountains, hovering, watching. As I made my way closer, they razed something on the ground and then left. I could have chased them, but I knew I missed my opportunity to surprise them, so instead, I landed.”

“The carriage—”

“Yes.” Niressa shakes her head. “Your mother’s carriage, and the others accompanying her. She was lying on the ground. She didn’t burn, if that’s any consolation to you. I know humans fear fire,” she murmurs softly. “She was thrown from the carriage, I think. She wasn’t breathing. And beside her on the ground, her crown laid, beckoning me. Shining in the firelight and the sun.”

I wince as the scene unfolds before my eyes, as if I can see it play out before me.

“The teal rose glittering in the middle of that crown called to me, Taryn. I lost my parents, the people who gave me this strange mix of coloring. Something about a teal rose felt like it was *meant* for me. So, I took it.”

I nod my head, blinking away the tears threatening to fall. “That makes sense.”

“I’ve upset you,” she hisses, bringing her head closer.

“No,” I answer, shaking my head as I wipe at my eyes. “I’m upset, yes. But it isn’t your fault.”

“What is it?”

“I hate that you were orphaned. I hate that my mother was murdered. I hate that I don’t understand *why*. It’s a lot for me to process.” I suck in a deep breath and lay my hand across her muzzle. “I’m very sorry about your parents.”

“And I’m sorry about your mother. I’m even more sorry you spent time thinking I was to blame for her death.”

I shake my head, throwing my arms around her. It’s strange to think that this is her muzzle, her mouth. But in this form, it’s as big as any person. I lean back, and before I can think better of it, I press my lips gently to the warm scales beneath her nostrils. “I know better now.”

Niressa’s eyes widen before she nudges me backward, tucking me into her wing once gain. “Who is Dary?” she asks suddenly.

I smirk, settling in against her side as I watch the snow drift down outside the ledge. “A longtime friend. We were engaged, once,” I chuckle.

“Engaged?” she snaps.

“A long time ago,” I explain, laughing. “You’re quite jealous, aren’t you?”

“Mmm.” Niressa murmurs, laying her head down on the stone floor beside me. “There’s parables about the greed of dragons.”

“Possessive beast,” I laugh, ignoring the puff of smoke that drifts up from her nostrils at my words. But in truth, the most selfish part of me wants to purr at that possessive nature.

Niressa is keen. That thought drifts through my head as was I watch the snow drift toward the ground outside.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Niressa

I stare down at Taryn where she rests between my wing and my side, and for a moment, it's as if she belongs there. Her steady, even breaths, tell me she's sleeping. But I already knew that.

She fell asleep somewhere between the story of how she broke off her engagement with Dary and me admitting I'd only ever been with Anaka. Sliding away from her carefully, I slowly let her head rest on the ground before I shift back into my human form.

My arms stretch over my head for a moment before I pick her up from the cold stone floor. The way her arms instinctively wrap around my neck in her sleep stirs something deep in my chest, something I haven't felt in a long time. My arms tighten around her as I walk us through the cavern, toward my bedchamber.

The fire on the floor still burns precisely where I left it. Dragonfire is true—it won't burn out unless meddled with. Carefully, I step around the piles of trinkets in the floor and lay Taryn on the bed, brushing her hair from her face as she rubs her head into the pillow.

"Mm," she sighs, wriggling down into the mattress. I pause for a moment, watching her as she settles. I can't believe how easy she sleeps. It's a talent.

I could never be carried and not wake up from it, not without something else being at play like a drug or an injury. This girl, though, she

can sleep through anything, it would seem.

As I crawl onto the bed beside her, I hesitate for a moment, staring down at the dark-haired beauty. Her lips part in her sleep, quiet breaths filling the room alongside the sound of fire sizzling against stone. Just as I start to slip to the side, to find my place in the bed beside her, Taryn lets out a tiny sigh that freezes me.

Her hips tilt ever so slightly down toward the bed and my nostrils flare, scenting her arousal. I don't know what she's dreaming about, but it must be good. The little sighs continue for a moment, tempting me until I shake my head and crawl my way down. Gently, I pull my tights off her legs—there's something very satisfying about seeing her in my clothes—and lick my lips as her legs relax.

I glance up at her, waiting to see if she's going to wake up, but her eyes never open. She just keeps sighing, her breathing growing a little heavier as she enjoys whatever is happening in that dream.

Smirking, I slide my hand up her leg, my fingernails dragging across her thigh before I reach her pussy. My middle finger slips between her lips and a shiver rushes through me at the wet heat waiting for me there. Slowly, I press inside her, a growl rumbling my chest when her hips grind down against my hand.

Without any more hesitation, I lower my mouth, slipping my tongue from her entrance to her clit as I add another finger, dipping the two in and out of her core a slow, lazy pace.

“Mmph,” she moans, her voice groggy with sleep as my tongue circles her clit in steady, deliberate circles. Her pussy spasms around my fingers, tightening and releasing as I urge her on. Latching onto her clit, I suck, swirling my tongue across it as her hips press down on my fingers.

“Niressa,” she gasps, her fingers threading through my hair as she wakes up. “What are you—Oh Gods,” she whimpers as her head falls back down on the pillow beneath her.

“Mmm,” I growl against her, lapping at her as my fingers surge in and out of her core. “That's it.”

Taryn's grip on my hair tightens as she grinds her pussy against my lips, onto my fingers. I add a third, shuddering as her pussy stretches around my fingers, all her warmth soaking into me. “You taste like fucking *silver*,” I snarl, my own thighs clamping together as the ache between them grows stronger.

“I—”

I slip my fingers from her pussy and she whimpers at the loss. My free hand digs into her hip, pulling her farther down the matters, closer to me as I close my mouth over her. I lap from her entrance to her clit, over and over, at a maddening pace.

“Niressa,” she hisses, her impatient hips grinding toward me for more. My fingers trail down lower, finding her ass and I circle the tight entrance, spreading her slick across it. “Oh,” she murmurs, her legs spreading beneath me as I press carefully into her. “Oh,” she moans.

“Mmhm,” I groan before dipping my tongue into her core. My finger works in and out of her ass as my tongue curls inside her. Lapping back up to her clit, I slowly work another finger into her and she gasps. “Shhh,” I whisper before closing my mouth around her clit.

“Oh Gods, it’s—” Whatever Taryn was going to say dies on her lips as a throaty moan spills out of her instead. I plunge in and out of her, my tongue tracing circles over her clit as she shudders beneath me. When her orgasm begins to slow, I pull my fingers from her and slip my tongue into her core one more time, just to taste.

When I lean back, wiping my mouth, I chuckle. “How do you taste like silver?”

“I—” she shakes her head. “I have no idea what silver tastes like.”

“You don’t eat with silver?”

“Yes,” she scoffs, bracing her hands on her head as her chest rises and falls quickly. “But there’s always food on it. I’ve never tasted the silver.”

“Hmmm,” I shrug. “Perhaps humans just don’t quite understand it.”

“Perhaps,” she laughs. “You still won’t let me taste you?”

I shake my head, even as my core clenches at the thought. “It’s not a wise decision, Tiny Treasure.”

“Mm,” she muses, patting the bed beside her. I crawl up to her and press a kiss to her temple as I slip my arm around her waist.

“Sleep,” I chuckle as she mumbles under her breath.

“I was sleeping,” she points out. “Someone decided to wake me up with their tongue between my thighs.”

“You’re very welcome,” I growl, leaning down to nip her ear.

Taryn’s silent laughter rocks her against my chest as she snuggles in closer, preparing to fall asleep. I close my eyes, too, willing myself to rest.

I don’t know what I’m going to do when I have to give her back.

The thought drifts through my mind like snow. But there's nothing I can do about that now.



I ROLL OVER, MY HAND FALLING AWAY FROM TARYN'S HIP AS MY EYES blink open. Something woke me up. I sit up carefully, my heart pounding in my chest as a familiar scent fills my nostrils.

Fire and ash fill my nose and my blood runs cold.

A dragon.

It's a scent I can only attribute to my own kind. Dragons always smell like a fire that's just been lit or is about to die out. I carefully slip from the bed, trying not to wake my Treasure before I make my way into the tunnel. Once I'm through the door, I run for the main cavern, my teeth already sharpening.

My scales rip through me as soon as I reach the edge of the tunnel, my lip snarling back as my eyes land on the small golden dragon sitting on the ledge of my nest.

"Niressa," she purrs.

"Leave, Anaka," I growl, slowing as I near the center of the cavern. "There's nothing here for you."

"You were supposed to return the girl. Aeronel was clear," Anaka sniffs, her golden scales shining in the early morning light.

"Do not speak of her," I snap, my claws digging into the stone beneath me as I slowly make my way toward her.

"You can't be serious," Anaka laughs, her wings spreading behind her, blocking the light. "Return the silly human to her silly human father and you can go back to your isolation uninterrupted, Niressa." White fire falls from her nostrils as her narrows her eyes on me. "You know he'll get what he wants, one way or another."

A roar tears from my chest as I rush her, rage filling my bones. I haven't spoken to Anaka since before—

Our bodies collide and her eyes go wide before we spill over the edge and into the air. My teeth gnash at her shoulder, her side, as we fall.

"It's been a while since I saw you so passionate, Niressa," Anaka laughs, lashing out at me with her tale as we spin through the air.

“Murderess,” I snap. My claws dig for her belly, desperately trying to latch onto something, to *hurt* something. Her claws do the same, gripping onto my hind legs.

The ground rises quickly toward us as we freefall. My wings open a second before Anaka’s, and she uses that momentum to shove me into the side of the mountain. Flames pour from my mouth and onto her face—not that it will hurt her, but it should blind her long enough for me to defend myself.

Anaka roars her anger as she beats her wings, shaking her head to dislodge the fire spilling across her eyes. I lunge forward, sinking my teeth into the vulnerable part of her wing, and pull.

She screeches, pulling away from me. That only worsens the damage to her wing, and when I let go, she falls to the ground below. I hover there for a moment, searching the sky for Aeronel. The two are hardly ever apart from one another.

From the ground below, Anaka shoots flames toward me and I dart away from them before slowly making my way to the snow-covered ground. When I land, however, I find her waiting in her human form, holding her arm to her chest. I call my own human body back to me and step toward her, narrowing my eyes. Steam rises all around us, the snow melting everywhere we step.

“Why do you care what I do with the human?”

“Foolish girl,” Anaka laughs. “Vanir is the *heart* of Lazoreat. Taking a seat in this realm only makes sense. The largest communities of dragonkin are here, the humans all look to this kingdom as an example. Vanir is the new Lazoras.” With that, Anaka shrugs her uninjured shoulder and meets my gaze, her golden eyes sparkling in the sun. “You’re interfering with plans beyond your comprehension.”

“You betrayed me,” I whisper, my chest rising and falling as I really look at Anaka for the first time in years. Her long blonde hair—nearly the color of her scales—falls down her shoulders and hides her breasts as she licks her lips and tilts her head to the side.

“I was loyal to my family.”

“You were supposed to be loyal to *me*!” I roar. Rage, grief, hurt, and fear all war for power inside me, threatening to shred me to pieces. “You betrayed my family to your own. When we were still mated . . .” I shake my head as I admit those words out loud. I regret ever taking this vile

creature into my heart. The painful process of breaking that mating bond nearly drove me mad. “Anaka, do you have no conscience?”

“My conscious is clean. You were a pawn as much as she is,” she sighs, turning around. How she could say something so cruel . . . how she could *do* something so cruel as trick me into a mating to achieve some espionage for her brother, is beyond me. As she walks away, the snow melting around her feet with every step, my fists curl up at my sides.

“Where are you going?”

“You should check on your hoard, Niressa. You’ve always been too easily distracted.”

My heart stops as I drag my eyes away from the cruel blonde retreating into the forest to stare up at my mountain. *No.*

“No, no, no, no, no, no!” I whisper as my body shifts. I beat my wings before they’re even fully formed, trying to reach my nest before it’s too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I roll over to find the bed empty and I purse my lips in a pout. I don't like that, waking up alone after making love. And suddenly, I feel guilty for the girls I've sent from my chambers before they could even get comfortable enough to fall asleep.

"Gods," I mutter, rolling onto my back to stare up at the ceiling. How did I get here? Before I can ponder my feelings for too long, the sound of footsteps echo in the tunnel. Heavy footsteps. My eyebrows shoot up my forehead as I scurry from the bed, searching for a weapon. The dagger I took from Niressa's hoard lays on a large rock by the door and I quickly grab it, pressing my back to the wall as I wait.

Who could be in the tunnels? And where is Niressa? She wouldn't let anyone in here . . . I take a calming breath, trying to ignore all the worst-case scenarios flashing through my mind as I grip the dagger tightly.

Fear grips my chest as the sound of shuffling boots grows closer. My pulse pounds in my ears, drowning out the sound, even though I know it's getting closer. Closer. When a dark figure enters the room, I rush forward, the dagger raised to strike.

The man turns around, his hand falling on my forearm before I can make contact and I look up into familiar green eyes and stumble backward, out of his grip. "Dary?"

"Taryn," he hisses as he takes another step toward me.

"Oh Gods, Dary," I murmur, rushing toward him. I throw my arms around his neck, shaking my head. "I'm sorry."

“Shh,” he whispers, patting my back as the sound of more boots fill the tunnel outside my room. Someone grunts something beside us but I can’t hear them over the sound of my own heartbeat and Dary’s murmured words. “It’s okay. You’re okay. I’m here.”

“I nearly killed you,” I gulp.

“You could never,” he scoffs, pushing me back away from him to examine me. “Are you well? Injured?” As his eyes roam my body they fall down to my exposed thighs. The blouse is long enough to cover my most important bits but it’s certainly not appropriate for a princess to be seen in. My cheeks flush as Dary’s do and he clears his throat.

“I’m fine. What are you doing here? The mage said Father was bringing the crown—”

“We have it,” he assures me before grabbing a pair of tights from the ground. “Get dressed. The men don’t need to—um—get dressed.” He pushes the bundle of cloth into my chest before turning around and guarding the entrance. Dary, ever the gentleman.

As I pull the tights over my legs and up to my waist, I ask him, “How did you manage to get in here? Where’s the dragon?”

“The Izvoras scouted the mountain. They claimed this would be the perfect time to come—”

My eyebrows cinched together as I wondered why they thought that. Did Niressa have some schedule I had been oversleeping and missed? Perhaps she went flying at the same time every morning . . .

“You have the crown, though?”

“Wythecliff has it,” Dary assures me as he takes my hand in his own, leading me into the tunnel. We follow several knights into the main cavern. A few fawn over piles of treasure while Wythecliff lays a bundle of cloth in the center of the floor. Unfolding it, he reveals Mother’s crown and the Lazoras crest.

My eyes scan the ledge for Niressa, for her beautifully colored scales, but she’s nowhere to be seen. My heart sinks as I realize I’m not going to get the chance to say goodbye.

I don’t know what I’d say, even if I could.

Perhaps it’s better this way. Goodbyes are hard. This . . . thing between us isn’t something that was supposed to happen, for a plethora of reasons. Not least of which is that we have no future together. A dragon and a princess? That story never ends well, does it?

“Are you alright?” Dary asks as the men begin making their way back toward the tunnel.

“Don’t linger over the treasure lest it tempts you, idiot,” Ona’s shrill voice calls into the small crowd. “The dragon is gone. What about that servant girl?”

“Gone as well,” I murmur, casting my eyes to the ground as sadness creeps its way into my chest.

“Mmm,” Ona hums as her eyes bore into me, searching for something I’ll never admit to. “Let’s go then, before the beast returns.” I don’t know what knowledge Ona thinks she has, but I can tell she believes she knows *something* by the way her gaze lingers on me, seeing far too much. Eventually, she breaks the awkward eye contact and moves away from us. As Ona and several of the knights file out of the room, Dary’s hand tightens on mine, drawing my gaze back up to his.

“Are you alright?” he asks again. “You look—”

“I’m fine. I’m just overwhelmed. I’m glad to be going home,” I murmur softly. And I am glad to be going home, to be returning to a life full of people—but as my eyes drift back to the ledge, I can’t help but wonder if I’ll miss what I found in the solitude of this mountain.

We follow the party through the tunnels, the knight who originally stole the crown leading the way. I’m quiet beside Dary, a fact that I don’t think he misses, as he keeps glancing at me in the dim light cast by their torches.

“My sister will be glad to hear you’re unharmed, Princess” a deep voice rumbles behind me. I crane my neck around to see Aeron of Izvora smiling at me in the dark tunnels. His presence here puts me on edge. For a king to accompany my rescue party instead of my own father . . . it speaks of their intentions.

Though, the King of Izvora hadn’t tried to woo me, his sister had made her intentions very clear. And he seemed to support them.

My head snaps forward as we make our way through caves until they finally give way to sunlight. Wisely, Dary doesn’t speak. If my rudeness to the king was noticed, no one says anything as we trudge through the snow toward the waiting horses.

It’s a long trek around the base of the mountain to head toward Vanir. The path is easy enough for the horse to follow on its own and I find my mind wandering. To Niressa. To all the things that have changed since she

plucked me from the jubilee in her claws. To what my future looks like, armed with the information she's given me about my own ancestors and how they handled an heirless monarchy. I can finally—hopefully—put to rest all my concerns about being forced to produce an heir of my own. It's freeing.

As we curve around the mountain, my eyes rise to cliffside, to the ledge where Niressa sits, her brilliant scales gleaming in the sun. I pull Dary's cloak closer around my shoulders, trying to ignore the hole growing in my chest.

This sinking feeling consumes me and I'm not sure if it's guilt or something else, but I'd do anything make it stop.

Niressa doesn't shoot a blast of flame into the sky. She doesn't fly down to stop our party. She never moves from her ledge at all; she just sits there, staring after me as I move further and further away from her mountain.

And that sinking feeling in my chest grows stronger, my fingers tightening on the reins in front of me.

"Taryn," Dary whispers beside me. "What's happened, beauty? You don't seem yourself."

And I don't feel like myself either. I want to tell him that. I want to explain why my heart feels like it's being ripped to pieces by the very thing I want, but I can't. I don't have words to make him understand and I can't expose Niressa in front of all these people.

Instead, I shake my head, dropping my eyes to the snow as we move toward my home.



I BARELY PASS UNDER THE GATE AND INTO THE COURTYARD BEFORE MIRA comes rushing down the stairs to greet me. Her pale blue dress swirls around her legs as she rushes toward me. A servant grabs the bridle of my horse, and Dary dismounts his before quickly helping me down.

"Taryn!" she squeals as she throws her arms around me, squeezing me much more tightly than is appropriate. I hug her back, blowing out a shaky breath as new emotions crash against me in waves I can barely surface through.

“Are you alright? I’ve been so worried,” she murmurs, pushing me back my elbows to examine me further.

“I’m fine,” I promise her as my eyes raise over her shoulder to meet my father’s where he stands at the top of the stairs. He rushes down to meet me, even as I pull away from my overzealous best friend.

“Father,” I begin, but he wraps me in a tight hug, his arms shaking from holding me so tightly.

“I am so, so incredibly sorry, Taryn. You must forgive me,” he whispers into my hair and my chest swells with more of that emotion trying to drown me.

“I—”

Father steps back, his hands never leaving me as he stares at me with shimmering eyes. There are new lines creasing his brow, showcasing the worry he’s been dealing with in my absence. All the anger I’ve been harboring toward him about his nonsensical *war* with the dragons, fades away as I watch his eyes brim with tears.

“I was so scared I’d lose you, too,” he murmurs, shaking his head. He pulls me into another embrace, his long white beard tickling my cheek.

“Then why did you send the wrong crown?” I ask, leaning away from him as some of the anger returns, rearing its ugly head.

Father’s lips pull down into a frown and he opens his mouth to speak, closes it, then blows out a huff of air before he answers me. “I was selfish and stupid, Taryn,” he mumbles. “I thought I could hold onto that memento *and* get you back safely, too. It was foolhardy and I should have known better.”

“I could have died, Father,” I whisper. I know that wouldn’t have happened, now. Niressa could never hurt me. But he doesn’t know that, and I didn’t know that then, either. He put me in legitimate danger over some token from the past.

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“I can,” I sigh, shaking my head. “I’ll use it for leverage later, most likely.”

“What in Gods’ name for?” he asks, his eyes going wide.

“You’ll see,” I smirk, and he shakes his head.

“The dragons won’t take anything else from us,” he murmurs in a serious tone.

“How could you possibly know—”

“Come,” he chuckles, wrapping an arm around me as he leads me up the steps and into our home. “Let’s get you cleaned up properly and rested.”

When father relinquishes me to the servants waiting inside the doors, Mira comes to my side. I watch as all the knights who came to my ‘rescue’ file into the castle and toward the dining hall.

“Thank you all,” I call out, realizing I had thanked absolutely none of them for their help until this moment. King Aeron pauses, nodding his head to me even as his sister comes through the door behind him. Her own armor plastered to her curves like she’s on display.

“Taryn,” she purrs, clapping her brother on the shoulder before she speeds up to me. “I’m so glad you are well, princess.”

“Yes, thank you all for your efforts,” I murmur, glancing to Mira. Dary comes to stand beside her, his eyebrows cinched together.

“Of course, we wanted to see you returned safely,” Anna rushes out. “I was so sad that our evening was disrupted before we could get to know one another better.”

“Oh?” I ask before I think better of it. The sensual smile curving Anna’s lips tells me exactly how she planned on *getting to know me*. Usually, I’d be more than willing to engage in some court diplomacy with a woman as beautiful as she is, but right now, I find the thought turns sour before it even takes root.

“Yes,” she whispers, stepping closer. “Perhaps you’ll allow me to escort you to the gala signaling the end of the jubilee?”

My eyebrow cocks and I nod my head slowly, reluctantly. I can’t refuse her publicly. Not when her brother—a king—just risked his life to rescue me from the clutches of a dragon. At least, as far as anyone in Vanir knew.

“Perfect,” she laughs, bowing her head respectfully before retreating to join her brother in the dining hall.

“I take it you’re not interested in the Lady Anna?” Mira asks, sounding shocked.

“I—”

“She was just pulled from a dragon’s mountain,” Dary sighs, rushing to my defense. “I doubt that’s what’s on her mind right now. She hasn’t even had a proper bath and the girl is already begging for her attention.”

“I think you’re just jealous Lady Anna doesn’t fancy you,” Mira chuckles, sticking her tongue out.

“Princess,” someone says beside me, and I turn to face Serafina. “We’ve prepared some warm food for you in your bedchamber. Your father said you may want to eat privately after your ordeal.” Her eyes fall to Mira and Dary and then she looks back to me with a polite smile. “Of course, we always prepared enough for your friends.”

“Thank you, Serafina.” I move to walk down the hall, Mira and Dary still bickering at my side. Apparently, Mira never had that conversation with Dary while I was gone. I don’t know why that seems so important right now, but it does. Perhaps, I’m just trying to distract myself from my own problems.

As we make our way into my bed chamber, my eyes fall on the three bowls of piping hot soup waiting on the tiny table. There are only two chairs, but that’s never been a problem before. I grab a bowl of the soup and sit on the edge of my bed, sighing as the heat warms my fingers.

I already miss her warmth so much.

“What happened while I was gone?” I ask, interrupting their spat.

“What do you mean?”

“With the jubilee, the wedding lottery—”

“Everything was put on hold until we could get you back,” Mira replies, cocking an eyebrow. “You don’t really think your father would host a celebration while you were missing, do you?”

“I suppose not,” I sigh, tilting the bowl up to my lips.

“But?”

“But I was curious to see who *your* parents picked to wed their spoiled little darling.”

“Spoiled is an understatement,” Dary chuckles. He hisses in a breath as Mira swats him in the chest. “One of these days—”

“Mira,” I interrupt. Her eyes meet mine, and I know, then, that she hasn’t told him anything. That she might never.

“Several entered . . .” she admits, quietly.

“Anyone you prefer?”

“Plenty,” she laughs. “But not the one I wish for.” Her eyes dart to Dary for the briefest second, and so do mine. His posture changes, as if the conversation makes him uncomfortable. It’s painfully obvious he doesn’t like the idea of Mira marrying anyone. I don’t know why he won’t just—

“How are *you*?” Mira asks suddenly, interrupting my thoughts.

"I'm fine," I shrug. "Really, it was like a strange trip in the mountains is all."

Dary narrows his eyes as his arms cross over his chest. "You were kidnapped."

"You were *violently* kidnapped," Mira corrects him before she takes a sip of her own soup. "You have to have feelings about that. You don't even seem interested in the beautiful woman throwing herself at your feet. It's very unlike you, Taryn. What did you tell me that once?" Mira taps the side of her bowl before her eyes brighten with her epiphany. "Oh, I remember. *'Sapphics are hard to come by, Mira. Of course, I'd want to see if we're compatible. Don't be so quick to judge.'*"

I purse my lips. "Well," I huff. "That is still very much true. Sapphics *are* hard to come by. But I'm still allowed to have preferences, you know," I quip.

"You are. But by all accounts, the Lady Anna is quite your type."

"I'm not so sure," I sigh, remembering the way Niressa's unruly, beautiful curls fell across her shoulders every time she moved. My core tingles as I remember how hot her skin was against mine, how it felt like her tongue might set me on fire, but I wouldn't have even cared.

"The mage said there was a serving girl in the mountain?" Dary asks and my cheeks flush.

"Yes."

"Ooooh," Mira squeals. "That's the root of it then."

"So, these names on the lottery," I grind out, trying desperately to change the subject. I don't want to lie to my friends. I know I have to, but I'd much rather avoid the subject than do that. They deserve better from me, but I can't betray Niressa's trust. I simply can't.

"The dragon really didn't harm you? At all?" Mira asks, setting her bowl down on the table before she crawls onto the bed beside me.

"No," I answer honestly. "She wanted the crown and that was all. I was a means to an end." It hurts to say those words . . . partly because I know they're untrue.

And partly because I pray to the Gods they're not.

Even if I never see my dragon again, I want to remember whatever this strange connection between us was, fondly. I don't want it to be tarnished with the lies I have to tell to protect her . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Niressa

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the fog that's been clouding my thoughts all day. It's been days since Taryn left my mountain—since she was stolen from me.

Since she left.

I have to keep reminding myself that she went willingly. That she's back where she belongs. I have my treasure back. The exchange is complete and we both can carry on with our lives . . .

So why do I feel so *wrong*? It's as if every move I make takes more energy than the last. I haven't shifted back from my dragon form since she left. I've been wearing my scales like some sort of protection from the fact that my nest is empty now, that she won't be waiting in my bed with a smile, wearing one of my blouses like a too-short dress.

I groan, ruffling my wings as I step toward the ledge. The moon is bright tonight. Perhaps I can hunt myself out of this strange mood.

My wings unfurl as I leap from the ledge and take me higher into the sky. First, I circle my mountain out of habit, making sure nothing is amiss in the rocks and trees coating my home. Every so often a particularly brave human will wander up here, thinking they can hunt in my woods.

But I am the only hunter here.

Something darts to the right below me and I spread my wings, bringing my body vertical to halt my flight as I scan the ground one again.

A stag.

Quickly, I dart down to secure the creature. It will make a fine dinner. If I can't accomplish anything else tonight, I can accomplish that. I glide above the creature, preparing to grasp it with my claws, but my vision blurs.

I shake my head, trying to right myself. The world swims around me, tilting at strange angles and suddenly, I'm staring up at the stars.

"Niressa," a throaty voice growls nearby. The sound of leather wings flapping set my teeth on edge, but I can't summon the will to move quite yet.

"Leave me be, Juul."

"I saw you fall from the sky," she sighs, her bright green face coming into focus as she blocks out the night sky above me.

"Thank you for noticing," I hiss, slowly rolling over onto my feet. I shake the dirt from my wings, my tail whipping around behind me with my agitation, but my head swims again, my steps faltering.

"Gods," she mutters, coming to stand closer to me. Reluctantly, I lean on the old dragon and blow out a puff of smoke. "It's treasure sickness, isn't it?" Juul shakes her head and the motion makes me dizzy. "You've lost something, child. Check your hoard."

I swallow the fire in my throat. I can't cry in this form, so there is that small victory, at least. I hadn't considered the chance that the fog muddling my thoughts could be treasure sickness. How fucking ironic that in trying to secure my safety against it, I somehow managed to fall into its clutches . . . over leverage.

She was meant to be *leverage*.

But the truth of the matter was much more complicated than that. Somehow, my Tiny Treasure had truly become my treasure. I snorted a small arrangement of flames and shook my head.

"What I've lost isn't something that I can ever truly own," I sigh even as my stomach twists with the truth in those words.

"Come back to your kin, Niressa. Maybe we can help." Juul's bright blue eyes bore into me. With a growl, I shove away from the old dragon and finish shaking the dirt from my body.

"You stood by Aeronel and Anaka when they slaughtered my family. You all knew what happened and no one did a fucking thing," I snap. "You want to help me? You didn't help me *then*. You didn't help *them*!" I roar,

fire filling my chest as the memory of their betrayal takes hold, as if it were yesterday.

“We all make mistakes,” Juul whispers. “Our kind are lucky to live long enough to fix them, sometimes.” The old dragon casts me a long look, her eyes full of sorrow before she takes flight.

I stand there for a moment, looking up into the sky as my godmother flits off in the distance. It’s not the first time I’ve sent Juul away with vengeance on my breath.

But it may be the last . . . a voice whispers in the back of my mind.

I roar my rage at the sky, flames shooting from my lips in a continuous stream. And when I run out of breath to breathe the fire, I inhale and do it again.

My flames could reach that moon that mocks me so happily, if I try hard enough. I take another deep breath and spray flames into the night air until there’s no fire left in my chest, until my scales recede and I kneel atop my mountain, tears streaming down my face.

“What have I done?” I whisper to no one as I bury my face in my hands. “How did I do this to myself?”

But no one answers me. The moon and stars won’t share their secrets with the likes of one heart-sick dragon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



My eyes graze over the strange decorations in my father's study. He's always been too easily swayed by the merchants who come to court. Strange figurines and masks from faraway lands litter the room right alongside the stuffed remains of the bear that we stumbled upon in my childhood.

"Father," I murmur as my fingers brush over the models arranged on a table custom built to represent Lazoreat.

"Yes?" he asks, shooing my hand away.

"I wanted to speak with you about something." I hesitate on the table, wondering why it depicts troops at the bottom of each mountain range. *He's still contemplating a war with the dragons.* With an eyeroll, I open my mouth to chastise him for his foolishness, but he interrupts me before I'm able.

"It will have to be quick, love. The meeting is starting soon."

"Have you ever heard the tale of King Lende of Lazoras?" I ask carefully, clasping my hands at my waist as my father takes a seat at the table.

"It doesn't ring a bell, no. Have you been researching your mother's family tree again?"

"Something like that," I lie. "The story goes that King Lende was infertile and, unable to produce an heir, his wife abandoned him. After that, he adopted an orphan from the village near his castle and raised him as his own son, his heir. That heir continued to the Lazoras line in name."

“Mmm,” Father nods, steepling his finger in front of his mouth. “I can see why that might stick out to you.”

“Do you think the people would accept such a thing? When it’s my time to rule?”

“Taryn,” he sighs, pulling his hands down his long white beard. “I think by now most of the kingdom knows you’re a sapphic. No one has ever brought any concerns to me—”

“They probably are holding out hope that you’d produce another heir. I agree, our people are very tolerant. I just don’t want to cause an upset if it’s avoidable. I never want to disappoint you,” I whisper. “Not with something I can’t control.”

“Taryn,” he sighs, shaking his head. He reaches a hand out toward me and I take it. Father squeezes my fingers and smiles sadly at me. “Your mother would be proud of the woman you’ve become. You’ll be a fine queen and the people will accept any child you call your own.”

“How can you know?”

“If it’s that important to you, adopt a child whenever you’d like. I’ll be the most doting grandfather and what could they say differently when they see me calling the child my heir?”

My throat closes with emotion and I rush around the table, wrapping my arms around my father. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“I didn’t know this weighed so heavily on you, or I’d have said so years ago. You are more than your ability to produce a child. Princesses and queens are not broodmares for kings. I’m sorry if I’ve ever acted in a way that made you think I believe otherwise.” The sincerity in his voice tugs at my heartstrings, endearing him to me even more than I ever thought possible.

My father has always supported me, always loved me. He has never questioned my nature or tried to convince me to be someone—or something—I’m not. I count myself lucky for that. A few of my paramours over the years weren’t so lucky. I’d heard everything from their parents being wholly unsupportive, to being completely in denial, to the girls themselves being frightened of what might happen if they were to celebrate their nature publicly.

It pains me to think people in Vanir—or anywhere in Lazoreat—are ashamed to be themselves. My father rules as an example of tolerance, but perhaps we should be doing more . . .

The sound of feet shuffling near the door draws my gaze and I step away from the table as Wythecliff and several other high-ranking officials from Vanir enter the room. The visiting rulers of the other kingdoms are also present, Izvora among them.

Dary meets my eyes as he stands beside his father, representing Tabistak. I wonder for a moment where his mother is, why she wouldn't want to join this meeting, but it seems that's a theme—only two queens are present, and they rule their kingdoms independently, unwed. I nod respectfully to the two women as I'm reminded of their presence.

Daana of Nizir bows her head to me, then Lora of Bellflan does as well. I smile to the two of them in turn. I've always felt a kinship with the two of them, though we aren't close. They both keep to themselves and I can't blame them. Being a female ruler is a different sort of path than our male counterparts are on, and the 'boys club' isn't always kind to us.

Though I believe Lazoreat to be a generally kind, open place, some truths are universally true.

Some men will always feel superior to women, no matter how many times they're proven wrong.

I push those thoughts to the side and focus on the drivel my father is pedaling to his peers. He wants to go to war with the dragons . . .

"If we rally here, along the main pass," he murmurs, pushing two pieces into place between the two largest clusters of mountains in Lazoreat. They run the border between Vanir and Tabistak. It's the most heavily dragon-populated area, everyone knows that. "We can launch an attack that would drive home our point."

"And what is our point?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"That the dragons cannot interfere, attack us, kill us without recompense," he answers coolly.

"It could work," Morren nods along, carefully maneuvering a different piece on the board. "Tabistak would aid, of course. We have always supported Vanir."

"This is not just for Vanir," my father growls. "The dragons are a tyrannical force, ruling us without our consent. Even as monarchs, we rule with the love of our people. Kings and queens without their peoples' support do not fare well nor do they last long," he reminds everyone as they murmur their agreement. "We have had no such opportunity to rebel against the dragons. They pillage caravans of trade goods and there is

never anything done about it. We put an end to that, in my opinion, by doing this.”

Within moments, my father pushes every piece that represents a fighting force to surround each mountain displayed around us. “When the first wave of attacks is successful, we can move further north and handle any smaller communities we find.”

“This is genocide,” I gasp, Niressa’s face flashing before my eyes.

“This is war,” he corrects. “And it has been for a long time. We just haven’t been defending ourselves. That needs to end.”

I shake my head, fear coursing through my veins. Not just for Niressa, but for all her people. They are *people*. The beasts in the mountains that my father hates so thoroughly are *people*. And, even beyond Niressa’s human form, before I knew she was a woman beneath those scales, the dragon I knew was kind to me. She was capable of thoughts and feelings—both good and bad—and that was something worthy of taking into account before such an irrational war was waged.

“Is it a war you think you can win?” King Aeron asks quietly, and the room goes still.

“Pardon me?” Father scoffs.

“Is it a war you think you can win? The dragons are skilled hunters. Their weapons are something we have no match for, and for the most part, they stay in their mountains and let us live peacefully. If you stoke their anger, do you think we will survive it?”

“This shocks me, coming from the mythical dragon hunters of the north,” Father snaps.

“Well said,” someone mutters from the throng and I tense as I watch Aeron’s face twist into something cruel.

“Do not mistake my hesitance for fear. Have any of you killed a dragon?” His severe gaze levels the room and when his eyes turn to me, a shiver curls my spine. There’s something unsettling about the Izvora eyes. They’re too bright, so bright they’re hard to look at.

“I didn’t think so,” he chuckles, shifting on his feet before he waves his hand, as if giving my father *permission* to continue.

“We have never struck back against the beasts, that’s true enough. But if we rally our forces together, we can put an end to their reign of terror for good.”

“This is madness,” I mutter, wringing my hands in front of me as everyone present turns their attention to me. I tilt my chin in the air, refusing to make myself smaller under their scrutiny. “The death this will bring—on both sides— isn’t worth it. As King Aeron said, the dragons are peaceful *for the most part*; a few instances of violence hardly warrant a full-scale incursion like this.”

“You could say that?” Father asks, his voice quiet. “After what they did to your mother? After you, yourself, were taken?”

“I wasn’t harmed,” I point out. “Even when you angered the beast by insulting it, I was never harmed by that dragon. That speaks volumes to me. And furthermore, they *speak*, they’re sentient. This is *genocide*,” I reiterate. My stomach twists with my own knowledge, knowledge I can’t share.

“If you drive the beasts from your own land, you’ll be pushing them to your neighbors,” Daana points out. “So, I see why you are trying to garner consent for this, and I appreciate it.”

“Yes,” my father nods. “It’s something that affects us all. If even one kingdom refuses to participate,” he continues, his eyes falling on Aeron, “it would sour the entire ordeal.”

Aeron shifts uncomfortably under the stares accosting him. So far, we are the only two who have spoken against this insanity. If he can resist the temptation . . .

“It would have to be worth it, for me to put my people at risk in such a way. Dragons are strong, crafty beasts. You haven’t fought them. You think you know the extent of their strength and cruelty, but I assure you, you do not. I would have to train your people. There would be losses . . . heavy losses.” King Aeron stares at my father, his jaw setting with his resolve. “It would have to be worth it.”

“And what would make it worth it?” he asks. I can hear the hope in his voice. My father is master negotiator; it’s one of the many reasons he takes so kindly to the merchants that travel through our kingdom, one of the reasons he’s so close with Mira’s father. He knows that if there is a tipping point, something that could make the king sway toward the decision *he* wants him to make, then there is room to negotiate to his own ends.

Even if he never truly gives Aeron what he wants.

But what does he want? I wonder, narrowing my eyes on the strange northerner. The north has been self-sufficient without trading with other kingdoms for generations, at least. What could we have that they want badly enough to enter a war Aeron knows we might lose?

“A foothold in the south. We are isolated in Izvora. I aim to change that, during my time as king.”

“And how would you acquire such a foothold?” My father’s voice is deadly calm, as if he already knows the answer.

I’m afraid I know it as well.

“By joining our two houses,” Aeron answers, as if it’s obvious.

“No,” I snap.

“She’s a sapphic, Aeron,” Father sighs, shaking his head. Beside him, Ona goes completely still. Her magic brushes against me without her even glancing my direction, as she stares down the northern king with a severe glare. I’m not sure if she’s on my side or not, in these. I know before I was taken, she had her reservations about Izvora, but she certainly doesn’t like *me*. Marrying me off would likely suit whatever her purposes truly are.

“She doesn’t have to marry *me*,” Aeron snorts. “Though, anyone would be lucky, princess, I meant no offense.”

My lip pulls back as he tries to compliment me. My skin crawls as Aeron holds my gaze, a smile twitching the corners of his lips up. “She could wed my sister—my heir—Anna.”

My hands clench into fists at my side as I shake my head. I didn’t know Anna was his heir, but that makes no difference. I will not be *married off* to *anyone*. I’d broken the engagement to Dary that was planned when I was a child and I will not be forced into such an arrangement as an adult.

“I’d be proud to have your lovely sister as a daughter-in-law,” Father sighs. “But I will not force my only child to marry. Tabistak can attest to that. Our children were betrothed when they were born, an ancient, outdated tradition. But it was tradition, so we went along. When they came to us, seeking permission to end the contract that would see them wed, we acquiesced.” Father turns to me with a slew of emotions sprawling across his face. “She can marry whom she wants, Aeron.”

“Foolish,” Aeron hisses.

“It’s not foolish to respect the autonomy of those around us,” Father replies, dismissing the conversation as he begins moving pieces around the

board, trying to see if he can win this war he wants so badly without the help of Izvora.

“You would insult me in such a way?” Aeron asks, his tone deadly.

“If you consider it an insult, yes.”

“My king,” Ona hisses, her fingers spreading defensively, as if she might summon magic at any moment to protect us from the rage boiling in Aeron’s chest.

A sound too feral to be human slips from Aeron’s throat and all eyes rivet to him. The king’s shoulders rise and fall with each breath he takes. His eyes flash with anger, and for a moment, it’s as if they’re glowing in the flickering light of the dimly lit room.

“So be it,” he snaps, turning on his heel. Before anyone can utter a word—though I’m not sure what they’d say if they had the opportunity—he storms from the room.

The door bounces off the wall as he exits, pieces of wood splintering across the room from the stress. My eyes widen as I turn to Dary.

“*It will be fine*,” he mouths, shaking his head.

I hope so.

I don’t want us to make an enemy of Izvora, but if I’m reading the board correctly, my father can’t wage this war without him. We’ve lived without Izvora’s presence amongst the kingdoms of Lazoreat for this long.

We can live without them for a little longer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



I roll over onto my side for the umpteenth time, pulling the covers tight around me. The snow isn't nearly as heavy this far into Vanir as it was in the mountains, and the temperature inside the room is adequate. So why do I feel like I need to be warmer?

Because she is warmer.

Pushing that thought down as deep as I can, I slam my head into the pillow with a huff. How is it possible I already became so accustomed to her heat? To her presence?

My mind drifts to Niressa, the last image of her I have flashing through my mind. She looked so lonely sitting on the ledge, watching us leave. I hate to think of her like that: alone. From what she's told me, she's basically isolated herself completely after the death of her parents.

It's a tragic thing, but grief is meant to move. You're not supposed to dwell in it forever.

Not like my father.

And Anna of Izvora wants to *court* me. A groan slips past my lips as I mentally compare the two women. I can't. They don't have enough in common to even try. Anna is as different from Niressa as I am, and that's probably the problem.

I wish I'd gotten to say goodbye . . .

My fingers brush over my lips, imagining the way hers felt. It was like a brand against my mouth. It was like being claimed by the fire that somehow lived within her.

And maybe that's exactly what it was.

Maybe I'd been claimed.

But I can't spend my days pining over a woman I can't have. That's foolish. Still . . . I wish I could have kissed her one last time. I wish I could taste her now.

I never got the chance to truly taste her. She wouldn't let me—and by all the Gods if that didn't make me want to taste her more. I blow out a shaky breath as I try to get comfortable, snuggling deeper into my overstuffed mattress.

My eyes finally shut, but as I chase the darkness behind them, scenes bloom to life that have no business being nestled quite so close to the surface of my mind.

Niressa, smiling in the sunlight as we sit on the ledge. The way her tongue danced across my pussy like flames lapping at my skin until I was all but melted. The curve of her spine, the way her hips flare out from her slim frame. Her laughter echoing in the dark.

"Tiny Treasure?" a familiar voice calls from nearby.

I shoot up in the bed, scanning the room. Did I fall asleep? Did I dream it?

"Treasure," she hisses, drawing my gaze to the balcony. Just inside the curtain, Niressa stands wearing a loose dress, smiling at me. The thin material clings to her breasts but falls in loose, swirling panes of fabric to her knees.

"How—"

"I had to see you," she admits, rushing over to sit on the bed. Her arms slip around me, pulling me close before I can even properly greet her. "I know I shouldn't have come, but I needed to see you." Her heartbeat thuds against my ear where it's pressed against her chest and a smile curves my lips. *She missed me.*

Some selfish part of me takes pleasure in that.

"I was just thinking of you," I admit quietly as I relish in the heat soaking into my body. "Did anyone see you fly here?" I ask, suddenly, wondering how she managed to get on my balcony.

"No," she laughs. "I shifted far enough away that no one would question it. I am just another woman in Vanir, tonight."

"Scaling balconies," I add, leaning back from her embrace to look up at her with a scowl.

“Yes, another woman in Vanir *scaling balconies*,” she smirks as her hand slides down my cheek. My face turns against her warm palm instinctively. “I missed you,” she murmurs.

“I missed you, too. I’m sorry we didn’t get to say goodbye.”

Something in Niressa’s expression changes. Her beautiful eyes harden for a moment before softening again, focusing on me. “I’m sorry we have to say goodbye at all,” she whispers.

I turn my head, pressing my lips against her palm. A thick sigh, full of emotion, chokes my throat as her words wash over me.

“As am I.”

Niressa kisses me. She kisses me without warning, without preamble, without hesitation. Every confusing emotion brewing between us sizzles on her lips against mine as she claims me with her mouth.

I sigh against her lips, sliding my tongue over hers as her hands roam my body hungrily. Whatever calm Niressa had in the caves is gone. She’s someone entirely different now right now . . . someone raw, someone possessive. Her kisses come in short, hot bursts, nipping at my lips as she leans me backward.

I stare up into those eyes, my hand cupping her cheek. Niressa’s eyes dart back and forth, as if searching for something in my eyes. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but in this moment, I’d give her whatever it is.

A pressure builds in my chest until it feels like it might burst. Quickly, I press my lips to hers again, rolling us so I’m on top of her. As I stare down at Niressa, my hands smoothing down her kinky coils, she looks up at me with a smirk.

“And what do you think you’re doing, Tiny Treasure?”

My eyebrow cocks as I kiss a line from her ear to her neck, then gently bite her breast through her dress as I slide it up past her hips.

“Treasure,” she hisses in warning.

Before she can tell me what a bad idea it is, I slide my fingers through her wet folds, shuddering at the heat waiting there. My fingers dip into her core and her back arches beneath me, her hands slipping up my arms. She opens her mouth to speak and I shake my head, begging her not to say it. I need this. With every piece of my soul, I need this. I have no idea what I have to offer her, I have no idea where she fits here, in this world, but I *need* her.

And if this is all we have, I intend on making the memory something worth reliving.

“Shh,” I murmur, working my fingers in and out of her center. Her teeth drag across her bottom lip, her brow furrowing even as she reaches up, wrapping her arms around my neck. Our lips crash together in a furious blend of need and passion, of patience and rush.

My thumb circles her clit and a growl slips past Niressa’s lips as she sinks her teeth into mine. My fingers curl inside her as I pull away from her kiss, moaning at the small bite of pain.

“Treasure,” she warns, but I push on her chest until her head falls back on the pillow, slowly trailing my way down her body. My teeth graze over her stomach, nipping through the thin material of her dress as the fingers of my free hand dig into her hip. I slip my tongue along the bend in her thigh, smirking when she shudders.

But I want to taste her.

I pull my fingers from her core, shivering at the whining moan that slips from her lips at their absence, and wrap my hands around her thighs before I lower my mouth to her pussy.

As my tongue slowly swirls through the wet folds waiting for me, I whimper. Niressa tastes like a dream, like liquid fire melting snow that reveals the first wildflowers of spring.

My tongue dives into her core then works back up to her clit, circling it, sucking it as my fingers slam back into her.

“Taryn!” she cries out, her hands fisting in my hair.

Moaning into her pussy, I work my fingers in and out of her as I suck her clit, flicking my tongue against the sensitive bud as she writhes against my face.

“Up here, now,” she growls. Fingers dig into my arms, pulling me away from my place between her thighs and I whimper at the loss of her pressed to my lips.

Niressa snarls as she kisses me, the sound vibrating through my body as her tongue dances across mine. And just as suddenly as the kiss began, it ends. I’m flipped around, my breath leaving my body in a quiet *oof* as I take in my new perspective.

Just as my eyes focus on the Niressa’s legs spread before me, my gaze trailing down her stomach to finally land on her pussy, a wet heat closes around my own clit and my eyes roll back in my head.

Niressa growls against my pussy as her tongue lashes against me, pushing me deeper into this frenzied inferno growing between us. I bend down, moaning against her clit as my tongue swirls against her.

“Fuck,” she gasps, slipping a finger into my core. My hips grind down against her as I latch onto the sensitive bundle of nerves, flicking my tongue against her over and over without mercy.

Her fingers slide from my pussy, rubbing smooth wet circles over my ass and I groan as she pushes inside me. My breath stutters and I slam my two fingers into her core, whimpering as she fucks my ass, pounding me while she laps at my pussy.

“Oh Gods,” I whimper. “I can’t—”

“Come with me,” she begs, her voice husky, full of need.

My eyes clamp shut as I curl my fingers into her g-spot, my fingers petting the precious spot over and over as the tip of my tongue dances over her clit.

Niressa shudders, her core clenching around my fingers. Her hand shakes as her orgasm sweeps through her and the subtle vibration against my sensitive entrance sends me over. I roll my hips down against her face, whimpering as the first waves of pleasure crash through me.

My back arches as tiny aftershocks of pleasure burst through my core and I roll away from Niressa, panting. I cover my pussy with my hand, staring up at the ceiling as I wipe my face with the other. “Gods,” I mutter, shivering through the twitches as they wrack my body.

Niressa chuckles, her fingers finding those of my free hand. My head tilts to the side and I press my lips to the outside of her thigh, smiling.

“Well,” I laugh. “That was quite the reunion.”

Niressa pulls on my hand until I slowly move up beside her, laying my head on her chest. “It was,” she whispers.

As I lay there, my head cradled on her shoulder as get comfortable, I realize something looks different about her. Her cheeks seem sallow where they usually glowed. Even her hair lacks the luster it usually sports in the curls toppling around her head, spilling over the pillow. Guilt tears at my chest that I didn’t notice before, too distracted by my own needs.

“Niressa, what’s wrong?” I ask. I’m sure I know the answer. I’m sure she’s angry with me for leaving. And I can’t fault her for those feelings. We both knew I would have to leave eventually and return to Vanir, but I didn’t even get to say goodbye.

Even if I had, she might still be upset.

I'm fairly certain I still would be.

"Is there any room for me in your life?" she whispers, her fingers gently caressing my arm. She doesn't look at me, just stares up at my ceiling as the question hangs between us.

"What do you mean?"

"Can we ever be together?"

I purse my lips, trying to find the words I want. I've wondered the same thing. I feel something for Niressa—something that goes beyond the earth shattering orgasms and easy smiles. There's something about her that pulls at me, begs me to be close to her. But *do* I have room for her in my life?

I have no doubts that I do, for Niressa the woman. Niressa the dragon, however, that's more complicated. How will my people react if they find out?

And the duality of her nature is a secret. So, if she were to stay here in Vanir with me . . . she would be forced to live a lie. Can I really ask that of her? Of anyone?

Niressa tenses beside me and I realize my silence has stretched on too long as I contemplate my answer. With a heavy sigh, I roll over, bracing myself on her chest so I can peer down into her bright pink eyes.

"I would like nothing more than to have you here with me. But I don't know if you'd be comfortable living somewhere where you would have to constantly hide who—and what—you are. I don't want to be selfish—"

"You're ashamed of me," she sighs, pushing me off her chest as she rises from the bed.

"Niressa," I murmur, holding out my hand. "That's not it."

"I thought I could change things by coming here, by talking to you, Tiny Treasure. And for a moment, I felt better. But knowing you can never allow me into your strange little piece of the world was more detrimental. I shouldn't have asked." Her dejected look twists my heart and I reach for her, wishing I could help ease this pain somehow. This doesn't seem like her. She seems far less calm, far less reserved than normal.

As Niressa walks toward the balcony, my pulse skyrockets, my heartbeat thudding in my ears. Anger, worry, fear, and resentment all pulse through me, fighting for dominance in my chest.

"You think so lowly of me?" I snap.

“No,” Niressa sighs, shaking her hair as she rights her dress. “I think nothing—”

“Do you feel like I used you, Niressa?” I ask, my eyes going wide. “Like I left your bed empty after a night of strong connection? Do you feel that way?”

“Taryn—”

“Answer the question,” I plead, grabbing a pillow and bringing it into my lap.

Niressa’s face twists, her eyes rolling shut as she considers her words. But I can already see them on her face, in the way she winces at the question.

“I feel like it was a mistake to get so attached to you,” she admits. “I can’t keep you.”

“I’m not an object,” I sigh, shaking my head. “But I have room in my heart for you . . . there’s something here.”

“But you can’t have me in your life.” She doesn’t word it as a question and the way her lip curls, her head shaking with disgust as she turns to leave again *enrages* me.

“How dare you judge me,” I screech. “How dare you hold the life you knew I lived against me. I’d gladly welcome you here, to court, to Vanir, to my bed. All of it. *You* have secrets *you* can’t share with the world—and trust me, I understand your reasonings after some of the things I’ve heard—but you can’t lay that at my feet when it’s *yours*.”

Niressa’s step falter as her hand slips through the curtain and falls on the handle that leads to the balcony. I watch as her shoulders slump, as her hand twists the handle, and a rage fills me like none other I’ve ever experienced.

“If you leave now, don’t come back,” I whisper, fury punctuating my words with each squeeze of the pillow in my lap. “If you walk away from this truth, from this honesty, instead of trying to come to a compromise that works for both of us, do not ever come back. And don’t fault me for it either,” I hiss as she turns around, her lips parting with angry words I don’t give her time to speak. “Don’t you dare sit on your mountain and fault me for your own *foolish* pride. If you do this, do it bearing the weight of that decision and make sure you’re happy with it, Niressa.” My hands shake as I watch her mouth open and close again, as if she can’t find the words to say. Or thought better of the ones she found.

“You’re right,” she whispers, tilting her chin in the air, her severe gaze meeting mine. “I can’t live as your secret.” And with that, she walks away, disappearing from my sight as the curtain swishes behind her, the sound of the balcony door shutting all too loudly in the quiet room.

I stare at the door, my heart thundering in my chest as the reality of what just happened sinks in.

I sent her away.

I closed off any chance of ever seeing her again. I . . .

My face twists with anguish as I bury my head in my hands, the tears falling like rain through my fingers as the fireplace crackles across the room.

What have I done . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I lean on the bannister of the balcony overlooking the small lake behind the castle. It's always beautiful at night. Dary passes me the bottle of mead and I take a drink, making a sour face.

"This is a strange mix," I cough, handing it to Mira instead.

She sips the bottle slowly, as if it's nothing more than water, before passing it back to Dary with a grin. "It tastes fine to me."

"It's from the Eastern Isles, isn't it?" Mira asks. She'd know. Her father has drilled the facts of the family business into her head since she was a child. Perhaps that's one of the reasons our parents have always been so close; both of them have female heirs.

"It is," Dary chuckles before taking another swig and smiling at Mira, clearly impressed with her knowledge.

"Do you think we'll finish the jubilee?"

"I'm not sure there's time, most of the kingdoms are due back soon." I glance at Dary, my heart twisting as I realize I've lost my entire week with him this year. Mira is getting wed whether she tells Dary what's in her heart or not, and one day, Dary will be wed as well. These spring visits will be very different when they're married. No more late-night balcony drinking parties, no more picnics on the knolls surrounding the castle, and I hate that thought.

It's as if my childhood is leaving me. And while I'm a grown woman, I still very much want to hold onto those parts of myself. The parts that

make me *me*. My friendship with these two has definitely contributed to who I am as a person.

“Yeah, the visiting rulers will have to head back soon. Being away from your people too long is dangerous. Regents get greedy with power, people become accustomed to accepting orders from someone that isn’t their king.”

“Or queen,” Mira corrects.

“Or queen,” he laughs, saluting me with his bottle.

I smile at the two of them, noting how Dary’s eyes sparkle each time he looks at Mira, at how her cheeks flush whenever he catches her looking at him. How have they not put it together, yet?

“I’m sure Izvora is about to leave, at least. Father really pissed off Aeron.”

“He did,” Dary snickers. “But, to be fair, Aeron was incredibly bold with that offer. I’d respect him for it, if it wasn’t for the tantrum that followed.” Dary runs a finger through his long hair and shrugs. “A man is only as good as his ability to take the word ‘No’.”

I blink as his words sink into me. “Thank you,” I murmur.

“For what?”

“For always being kind to me. For not trying to force my hand when we were engaged. I know uniting our kingdoms with a shared heir would have been something historic, and our parents loved the idea as well. You never faltered as my friend, Dary, thank you.” I smile, truly grateful for the friendship we’d found in one another. Not everyone is so lucky as me.

“I didn’t—” Dary clears his throat and shakes his head, a slow smile spreading across his face. “I didn’t do those things for praise. They were the right thing to do.”

“And that’s precisely why you deserve praise, Dary,” Mira points out. “You truly are a good man. You had Taryn at a severe disadvantage, you could have manipulated her to your own ends or flat out refused to dissolve the agreement. Instead, you were kind, and that deserves to be said.”

“Well,” Dary murmurs, blinking as he looks first from Mira then to me. “I’m glad you two think so highly of me.”

I slowly drag my gaze to Mira, watching her reaction. She needs to tell him. Before the lottery.

The lottery.

“How are they going to handle the wedding lottery if the jubilee is basically cancelled?” I ask, tapping my lips.

“Several have already entered. I suppose they’ll pick from those.”

“That hardly seems fair,” I murmur.

“It seems silly to me,” Dary sighs. “I’m sure your parents will pick someone perfect for you, but you should just . . . wait.”

“Wait on what?” Mira asks, her cheeks tinting pink.

“Well—”

“What should she wait on, Dary?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest as I watch the two of them stumble around this topic like drunken toddlers.

Dary coughs, looking away with a shrug. “I know the lottery is a tradition, but it feels . . . forced. Doesn’t it?”

Mira huffs out a breath and pushes away from the bannister, storming past Dary as she disappears into my room. I blink at him, my mouth falling open as I shake my head.

The slam of a door signals Mira’s exit from my room and I narrow my eyes on my *other* oldest friend. “For all the sugar in your veins, you’re an idiot, Dary.”

“Now you’re mad at me, too?” he hisses. “Weren’t you both just going on about how amazing and sweet and kind I am? What the bloody hell have I done?”

I take a deep breath, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Why have you had an attitude about Mira’s wedding lottery?”

“It seems silly.”

“Don’t lie to me,” I snap. All the anger and hurt I tried to bury from the night before comes flooding back as I watch Dary’s face twist before his eyes lose focus somewhere over my shoulder.

“I just think Mira deserves better.”

“Better like you?” I ask, cocking my eyebrow.

“Taryn—”

“Stop. I understand the problems a relationship between the two of you presents, she said the same thing. All of it. I know.” I hold up my hand, puffing my cheeks out as I consider my words. “Mira is in love with you.”

“She—” Dary’s eyes go wide as he turns around, looking into the room behind him. He turns back to me, raking his hair back as he sputters. “She is? How do you know?”

“She told me. At the jubilee this year, right before I was abducted,” I murmur. “I shouldn’t be betraying her trust, but this seems like an exception to me. She’s going to be *married*, Dary. Whether or not you think you two can be together, she is going to be married. So, if you have something to say to her, say it while you still can.” I tilt my chin in the air, swiping the bottle of mead from his grasp before I roll my eyes. “Because even princes aren’t immune to jealous husbands.”

Dary scratches nervously behind his ear, his chest rising and falling. “Should I—”

“Give her a few minutes to calm down. You know Mira,” I sigh.

“How did you know?” Dary asks, jumping up to sit on the bannister beside me.

“You two aren’t nearly as discreet in your affections as either of you think you are. It’s painfully obvious. I only noticed recently, but once I did, I realized you’ve been in love with one another for years.”

“Why wouldn’t she tell me?” he huffs, shaking his head.

I had him the bottle, grinning. “She thought I’d be jealous.”

“You’re a sapphic.”

“Yes, and Mira is *ridiculously* loyal. She’s better than us both.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” he whispers quietly before sipping the mead. “I never told *her*, not because I was afraid of what you’d think, but because I know I don’t deserve her. Mira is profoundly intelligent, Taryn. She outwits me constantly, she’s never let my position prevent her from treating me like a normal human being, and she’s beautiful . . .”

“She is,” I admit. “So, what are you going to do?”

Dary grows quiet, picking at the rim of the bottle with his thumb nail. “Should I put my name in the lottery?”

“You’d be picked, for certain. Her father wouldn’t dare bypass a prince for any of the other nobles and merchants who might have offered themselves.” I lay my hand on Dary’s arm, meeting his eyes. “What will your father say?”

“I’m not sure he’d be happy about it. At all. But,” Dary chuckles around the mouth of the bottle, taking another drink. “It’s not like he can disown me. I’m his only heir.”

“It will be *quite* the scandal,” I admit, pursing my lips against a smile. “If you don’t want her to marry someone else, then you should do it.”

“You’re a very good friend, too, you know,” he whispers, tossing an arm over my shoulder. As he pulls my head to his I laugh, stepping away from the bannister and out of his reach.

“I’m alright.”

“You’re not, though,” he points out. “Something has been wrong with you. There’s something you haven’t told us, and don’t you for one second think I haven’t noticed.”

“Girl troubles,” I sigh. It’s the truth, at least.

“Who is she?”

“No one you know, but she’s . . . everything. And I can’t be with her and it’s killing both of us, I think. We got into an argument about it last night and I’m fairly certain I ruined any chance I have at having her in my life at all.” I swallow hard, blinking away unshed tears as I look away from Dary. I can’t stand the look of pity in his eyes.

“Why can’t you be together?”

“It’s complicated—”

“Don’t give me that shit,” he snaps and my head rears back at the sudden change in tone. “If you think Mira and I can be together, then you and whoever this girl is that has you all twisted up in knots have a chance, as well.”

“Dary,” I sigh. “It’s not like you and Mira.”

“Is she married?”

I hesitate. I should tell him she’s married. He’d drop it there. But I can’t bring myself to lie to him. Instead, I shake my head and shrug.

“Then it’s the same. If you want her, if you love her, then you will find a way to make it work.”

“I don’t know if I love her,” I admit quietly. “I’d like the opportunity to find out.” My heart aches with how true those words are. Is it love? I don’t even know. How can I? We haven’t had any chance to—

A loud roar splits the night air and Dary jumps down from the bannister. My heart hammers in my chest as I search the sky for Niressa. I see nothing. Moving to the bannister, I lean back trying to see the sky on the other side of the castle. Fire illuminates the sky and my eyes widen.

The bells ring.

“Get inside,” Dary hisses, pushing me toward the bedroom. He closes the balcony door and we rush out into the hall. “Taryn, stay in your room,” he snaps.

“No.” I shake my head, grabbing my dress up in my hands as I run after him toward the dining hall. We’ll be able to see what’s happening from the crossing there.

I have to stop her from doing this.

People run through the castles—servants seeking shelter, knights trying to make it to the fight. I have no idea where Mira is, I realize, as we slide to a stop beneath the stone archway that gives way to the inner bailey. “Mira,” I whisper, panic surging in my veins as my eyes track over the many heads lining the curtain wall. Crossbows ready, several knights wait for their opportunity to strike.

All along the balustrades surrounding the courtyard, knights stand, weapons drawn as another blast of flames pours into the courtyard. I stare up at the dragon roaring its anger, its massive wings blocking out the moon.

It’s not Niressa.

The golden dragon beats its wings, swooping around the castle to lay fire on my home. “Dary, what’s happening?”

“I thought it would be the one who took you,” he shouts over the yelling around us.

“So did I.” I shake my head as he moves to help the knights defend the castle. “I have to find Mira.”

Below us, in the courtyard, the mage stands with her hair swirling about her shoulders, magic gathering in her palms before she blasts it toward the dragon. He roars his displeasure before raining fire down on the courtyard once again.

A gasp breaks past my lips as I watch Ona throw her hands up a small barrier forming between her and the fire before it surrounds her completely.

“Get somewhere safe!” he orders, and I rush across the allure toward the dining hall in search of my friend. I don’t understand why the golden dragon is attacking. He *commanded* Niressa to return me to my home, so why would he attack it? And where is that smaller dragon that seemed to follow him around that day?

“Mira!” I shout as I burst into the dining hall. Several families of servants huddle around tables. The mothers hug their children close to their sides, the fathers stand at the ready to fight off anything they can.

I understand the sentiment.

“Have any of you seen Lady Mira?” I ask. Several heads shake no, and I curse under my breath, moving toward the courtyard. Where would she have gone? As I run through the hall, I slam into an armored chest. Immediately, I bounce backward, uttering an apology.

Hot hands fall on my upper arms and I find myself looking up into Anna of Izvora’s eyes. “Are you alright, princess?” she asks, steadying me.

“I’m looking for Mira,” I mutter, stepping out of her grasp. Her touch reminds me of Niressa’s and I can’t handle that comparison right now. “I can’t find her.”

“I’m sure Lady Mira is somewhere safe,” she murmurs, glancing to her right as the ground shakes beneath us.

“What’s happening?” I gasp.

“Something collapsed,” she rushes out. “Come with me.” Anna holds out her hand and I take it, following behind her as she pulls me through the corridors.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask suddenly, realizing we’re moving toward the rear of the castle. There’s no shelter back there, only the stables and the lake.

“I have to get you somewhere safe, princess,” she says again. “Come.”

I yank my hand back, shaking my head. “It’s not safe outside.”

Anna turns around and opens her mouth, preparing to say something, when the wall beside her caves in. I scramble backward and so does she, away from the falling rubble.

“Taryn!” she shouts.

My chest pounds with fear as I glance through the hole in the side of the castle. Fire pours into the corridor, engulfing everything as I run away from the flames. My feet pound the stone floor until the terrible scene is far behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, worry for Anna crossing my mind before I turn and run for Mira’s bedroom. *Maybe she’s in there.*

“Princess!” a knight yells as I run pass him. “You need to take shelter!”

“I have to find Mira!”

“Get to the bloody basement, child,” Edin growls before another tremor rocks the castle. My eyes go wide, and I shake my head, speeding toward the corridor I need.

As I pass another adjoining hall, a head full golden blonde hair steps out of the dark and into my path.

“Anna?” I ask, throwing my hand over my chest as if it’ll keep my heart from galloping away. “You frightened me. How did you—”

“Taryn,” she murmurs. “Come with me. He’s going to raze this castle to the ground.”

“He? The dragon?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know that?” I ask, taking a step back. Pieces of the ceiling start to fall behind Anna as she steps forward, following me. She doesn’t even bother *pretending* to be concerned about the ceiling collapsing above us. The night sky looms over head and I search the sky for the dragon.

A strange sound from Anna draws my eyes back to her and I gasp in horror as golden scales erupt from her skin. Her body shimmers and stretches and before a golden dragon rears her neck back, shooting smoke from her nostrils.

“We tried to play nice with you, imbecilic humans,” she snaps. “You never listen.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Niressa

T*reasure Sickness.*

I snort and roll my eyes as I pull a long blouse over my head. My eyes fall on the tights waiting on the bed, but I forego them. There's no one here to see me, anyway.

Treasure Sickness.

I can't have it if I'm not attached to her. I'm convinced if I put the Vanir Princess out of my mind, I'll be able to move past this. Because there's nothing else I can do.

I broke down and flew to Vanir to see her. I even—stupidly—let her make love to me, and *Gods* was it amazing. But none of that changed the facts of the situation we are in: Taryn is a princess and I'm a dragon. She can't be with me. Not publicly.

And I can't be her secret. That's not something I would ever be okay with. I'm not some *thing* to be ashamed of. I deserve better. And she deserves better than the ridicule and potential rebellion she would face if her people found out about me . . . some things just aren't meant to be, it would seem.

I shake my head, padding through the tunnels. A soft growl somewhere nearby catches my ear and I cut my eyes in the direction it came from. A she wolf lays against the wall with several pups clawing for their chance at a teet. I quiet the growl in my throat and move on—the wolves present me

no danger. As I walk back into my main cavern, I grab the crown from my most prized treasure pile and sigh, turning it over and over in my hands.

“You have caused me very much trouble,” I murmur to the beautiful trinket. As my fingers brush over the beautiful gems along the side, and finally over the teal rose in the center, I blow out a sigh. The day I found this crown, the day I found the Vanir Queen lying dead on the road, my life changed. I didn’t know it then. I didn’t know that one day, a silly trinket meant to bring me some semblance of peace and normalcy would bring the very woman who would upset all of that into my mountain. How could I have known?

I have to get her out of my head. “It was never like this with Anaka,” I sigh, setting the crown down gently. I never felt pulled toward her like this. I never had Treasure Sickness when she betrayed me. I was beyond angry, I was unhinged, but I never lost myself the way I am now. I can feel my thoughts slipping toward my Tiny Treasure with everything I do.

Her presence permeated my entire nest. I can still smell her. She smells like rose water and the entire cavern is full of that scent. I blow flames down onto the ground, running my hand through them as I contemplate how to clear the scent from the area.

Something flashes in the night sky outside the ledge and my head snaps in that direction. I wait for it to happen again, wondering if it was lightning—but I don’t smell a storm. As I walk to the ledge, another burst of light illuminates the sky in the distance.

Flames.

As I focus on that spot in the distance, a steady stream of light pours from the sky down toward the ground.

Toward Vanir.

Vanir is under attack.

My heart pounds in my chest, my dragon from ripping from my body as I dive from the ledge. When my wings finish forming, I rise up into the air, hovering above my mountain to see. Usually, even my dragon sight can’t see the Vanir Castle from here, but the flames clinging to the stones light it up as clearly as the sun itself.

Vanir is under attack by *dragons*.

I beat my wings, speeding toward the castle. My Treasure is in danger. All the thoughts and reasons to stay away fade away as I soar through the sky toward Vanir, my fire building in my chest.

My Treasure is in danger.



I DON'T KNOW WHAT I EXPECTED TO FIND WHEN I REACHED THE CASTLE, but it wasn't Aeronel screeching his displeasure as he spews flames down on a group of knights. I hover as quietly as possible on the outskirts of the city, looking for Anaka.

They're always together. I don't know why Aeronel has suddenly decided to attack Vanir, and I don't care. He will not destroy my Treasure's home or put her in danger. I can't allow it.

But I also know there are two of them and Aeronel is much larger than me. I have to attack quickly and in a way that ensures success. These humans are no match for the golden dragons, despite their best aimed arrows.

Aeronel spews another large batch of flames, directly onto the castle this time and I speed forward while he roars, hoping the sound in his own ears will mask my approach. When I slam into his back, my tail immediately wraps around his throat, my claws digging into his back and left wing. My own wings beat harder, trying to account for both our weight as the humans below us scatter.

"Niressa," he hisses, his head whipping around to gnash at my legs.

"Leave these people be, Aeronel," I snarl as my mouth closes on his right wing.

The golden dragon roars, flexing his wings and shaking until I lose my grip. I slip back and shoot higher into the air, out of range of his razor-sharp tail. Aeronel snarls behind me but I keep flying, avoiding the blasts of white-hot flames he sends into the sky after me.

"Your betrayal will not be forgiven a second time, Niressa," he snaps as he draws closer. My heart thunders in my ears as I pause, hovering while he barrels toward me.

My eyes narrow on the murderer himself and I bare my teeth, speeding toward him.

Aeronel's eyes go wide but he doesn't relent.

We slam into one another, an angry clash of scales and teeth. As my claws scrabble for his weak spot, his teeth sink into my neck. "Murderer!"

I roar, fire falling from my snout as I snap at his wings. I'll tear this male limb from limb. He's already taken so much from me.

"You fight better than your mother," he taunts, darting away from me. But my teeth already found their mark and the rip of his wing twists my stomach.

Aeronel bellows his pain, his right wing flapping harder as he tries to stabilize his flight. I narrow my eyes, my opportunity clear.

As I slam into the murderer, he roars. My claws reach out for his weakness. I'll pull his heart directly from his body for everything he's done. Just as I begin to scrape the scales, his claws lock with mine and we spiral through the air.

"Fool," he bellows. "You should have stayed in your mountain, Niressa."

Our heads clash together, each of us trying to reach the other's neck. I miss, my teeth instead sinking into his shoulder as his graze my wing. "You killed them," I hiss.

"Your parents were meddlesome beasts just like you," he snaps as we plummet to the ground.

I roll, pivoting our bodies so Aeronel hits the ground first. The impact breaks the hold between our claws, and I roll across the ground, groaning as my injured wing scrapes against the grassy hill.

Behind us, the castle is nearly engulfed in flames. As I limp toward Aeronel's still body, a shadow darkens the ground around me. "Anaka," I snarl, turning my eyes to the sky.

Aeronel's tail twitches and I rush toward him as fast as I can, a promise for death spilling from my mouth. Fire coats the ground around us. Mine. Anaka's. I'm not sure whose. As I push through the flames, the large golden dragon comes into view.

My vision swims and I shake my head. The wound on my neck is still bleeding, but it will heal. It's not a killing blow. As I near Aeronel, his labored breaths are the first thing I notice. Quickly, before Anaka can interfere, I rush toward the dragon king, my claw raised to strike his weakness from his chest when a roar meets my ears.

"Lay one talon on him and I will tear your little pet limb from limb."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



The dragon—Anna—whatever she is, hovers midair, bringing her claws—and me—up in front of her as she blasts flames over my head toward Niressa.

Niressa pauses, her claw pressed against the golden dragon’s ribs. My heart pounds in my ears as Anna’s claws tighten around me. I don’t want to die. There’s no part of me that’s willing to die for whatever issue the dragons have suddenly taken with Vanir.

The Izvoras are dragons . . .

Of all the reasons people have imagined for why Izvora has never come to a jubilee or visited any neighboring courts, never did anyone ever guess that they were *dragons*.

I watch as Niressa turns around, her tail whipping back and forth as she levels her gaze on the dragon holding me hostage. “Let her go, Anaka.”

Anna . . . Anaka . . . I shake my head, struggling to break free of the claws holding me. Aeron can’t possibly be so offended that my father declined his request for a marriage contract that he’d burn all of Vanir down. This has to be something else.

For a moment, I wonder if this has something to do with the bad blood between Niressa and the golden dragons. My body aches as I twist and push against the large claw wrapped around me.

“Stop squirming,” Anna growls to me before addressing Niressa. “Step away from the king,” she snarls.

“The princess has nothing to do with this,” Niressa explains, limping away from the large golden dragon where he lays spread out on the ground. Blood coats them both. Niressa’s brilliant scales gleam in the firelight, blood dripping down her scales. There’s so much blood . . .

“She has everything to do with it,” Anna snaps. “She was meant to be our foothold in this region! A way for us to integrate into the south. You ruined that.” Anna’s grip around me tightens and I beat against her claw, crying out in pain as the sound of bone grinding against bone fills my ears.

“Let her go,” Niressa snarls, limping toward us. She spreads her wings, but when she tries to take flight, she crashes back to the earth.

“So pathetic, Niressa,” Anna coos. “You used to be so much stronger than this.”

Niressa meets my gaze and steps backward until her tail is poised over the golden dragon’s chest. “I’ll end him, I swear it by the old dragons, the Gods. I swear it by anything you believe in, Anaka. *Let her go.*”

The snarl that vibrates Anna’s chest moves through my body as her other claw comes around me, one long talon pressing to my throat. Tears gather in the corners of my eyes as panic takes hold. I’m going to die. Lady Anna of Izvora—a fucking *dragon*—is going to kill me.

Niressa glances at the large golden dragon, and I wonder for a moment if he’s already dead. He hasn’t moved. Before my thoughts spiral any further, an ear-piercing shriek fills the night air around us and a beautiful emerald dragon slams into Niressa, knocking her away from Aeron.

“Juul,” she snaps, jumping to her feet.

“Niressa,” the green dragon hisses, curving around the unconscious king’s body, as if protecting him from Niressa.

“Thank you,” Anna growls to the green dragon.

The sound of leathery wings beats around us, and Anna’s hold on me loosens. I suck in a breath as the circulation slowly returns to my battered and bruised limbs. Fresh tears prick my eyes as the pain returns along with the blood flow.

“Let the princess go, Anaka,” Niressa snarls, taking another step forward.

“Why don’t you come get her?” Anna taunts, pushing her leg forward, holding me out as an offering.

My eyes searching Niressa’s. We both know this isn’t going to end well. I can see the pain in her eyes. Things shouldn’t end like this; before

we can even make up. But things hardly ever go the way they should in this life. I resume pushing against the claw wrapped around me as my gaze shifts from Niressa, to the green dragon, to all the dragons hovering around us.

“Release her, Anaka. The king’s foothold is secure,” a deep voice rumbles behind us, and Anna—Anaka—swings around to face the new dragon speaking.

My eyes go wide at the white dragon before me. Small patches of pale blue scales cover her hips and nostrils, and I wonder for a moment if she’s just patched in coloring or if this is a sign of aging for their kind.

“My brother lies on the ground, barely breathing, and you want me to *release* this infuriating woman?”

“Infuriating?” I scoff. Anna’s head drops staring at me with snarled up lips, smoke pouring from her nostrils as she glowers at me and I quickly close my mouth.

“Anaka,” Niressa pleads from the ground.

Anna pulls around to speak with the teal and rose dragon, her pink eyes wide with emotion I can’t begin to guess at. My heart breaks at the shimmer in her eyes, but no tears fall down her scaled muzzle.

“Release her. You’ve won,” she murmurs, her tail whipping toward a group of knights, their weapons lowered. The castle burns behind them, the fire dancing across the stones and I *pray* to all the Gods that Mira and Dary are safe. That my father is safe.

Anna growls, the vibration setting off a whole new wave of pain, but I don’t have long to whimper at the pain shooting through my bones. Anna’s claw disappears from around my body and I fall, careening toward the ground.

As the wind whips through my hair, the green grass shaded strangely by the shadows of the dragons and the strange mix of moon and firelight surges toward me. My heart pounds against my chest so hard it hurts, and a scream tears itself for my lips as yells sound all around me.

“Princess!”

“Taryn!”

“Treasure!”

Some strange nearly translucent light swarms around me, as if trying to cover me, as if it’s sentient. *Magic*. Whatever magic tries to intervene in my death is failing. It slips around me as I careen toward the ground,

passing against my skin like the thinnest silk I've ever touched, as I break through it.

My eyes slam shut as the ground grows so close, I can't stand to look at it anymore. I'm not brave enough to face my death head on, not like this. The faces of everyone I love pass across my eyelids.

My father.

Mira.

Dary.

My mother . . . I suppose I'll get to see her momentarily.

Niressa.

Fresh pain courses through my body as that realization cracks my heart to pieces. I do love Niressa. I don't know how. I don't know why. There's been barely a breath of time between us, but I love her.

And I'll never get to tell her that, I realize, the heartbreak spreading from my chest through the rest of my body.

Except, it's not the heartbreak that's hurting my bruised arms and midsection.

My eyes fly open, and I find myself staring into a large pink eye with a slitted pupil. The sparkling flecks in Niressa's eyes remind me of tears. I blow out a breath I didn't realize I was holding and throw my arms around her neck, my heart battering against my ribcage. "Oh my Gods," I murmur against her scales.

"Tiny Treasure," she rumbles, bringing her injured wing around me. I wince at the pain assaulting my body, but something in Niressa's gaze tells me I don't have time for my pain. She sets me down on the ground, carefully, and limps around to place herself between me and the dragons.

"What's happening?" I whisper.

"A revolution," she warns, her tail wrapping possessively around my middle as we watch the white dragon land beside the green one she called Juul and Aeronel.

"My king?" the white dragon hisses as she approaches him. Anaka remains in the sky above us, her wings beating through the air as more dragons come to land around their fallen leader. His sides rise and fall with his breath, but something *inside* him might be injured.

"Vitari," he murmurs between ragged breaths, lifting his head. "Help me stand."

“Of course, Aeronel,” the white dragon—Vitari—murmurs slipping her head beneath his damaged wing. She pushes him to his feet with the help of Juul mimicking her actions on the other side.

“The Gods’ will wins out, Niressa,” he sneers, wincing as he speaks. “For all your betrayal, you’ve only earned the same fate as your meddlesome parents. And for what? A human girl?”

“For what’s right,” Niressa corrects him, a snarl on her lips. “And you’ll stay away from her, Aeronel.”

“Yes,” Vitari sighs, her eyes meeting mine as she speaks. The blue and pink orbs glowing on her face seems magical, like she’s ethereal, or hardly real at all. “He will.”

Aeronel’s head snaps in her direction, his large snout parting to reprimand her, I’m sure. But before he can speak a word, a large spear-like barb slams through his chest, tearing a shrieking roar from his lips. Fire shoots from his mouth, his nostrils, the white-hot flames covering most of the dragons around him. Niressa shields me, her own body vibrating with a growl as she watches the horrific display.

“Brother!” Anna screeches, launching fire toward the dragons on the ground.

I hide my face in her scales as the heat builds to an inferno around us, the shrill cries of the dying dragon piercing the night and my ears. When I turn away from her scales, I find Dary and my father standing to the side, swords drawn as they watch the insane display. Blood drips down Dary’s face, but my father stands untouched, surrounded by his knights, their shields and swords raised. To his side, Ona stands, her hands raised defensively, prepared to defend her king.

It was her magic that tried to catch me. I have a moment to be the tiniest bit shocked by that revolution before Anna’s screams of rage draw my attention once again.

“You’ve killed him! Murderers!”

“*You* dare call me a murderer?” Vitari snarls, launching into the air after the smaller golden dragon. I watch in awe as they battle, their claws locking, their tails whipping against one another as their teeth scrabble for purchase in the other’s scales. But Vitari has an advantage: that strangely barbed tail.

The barb tears through Anna’s left wing as Vitari’s mouth closes around her right. Another roar envelopes us as the smaller dragon falls to

the ground, fire spilling from her mouth as dragons of all colors surround her, closing in as if to keep her secured and separated.

“We are better than this,” the green dragon snarls as she steps out from under the weight of the golden dragon’s corpse and it falls to the ground. It shimmers and suddenly, in its place, the body of the northern king lays. “We are not murderers, pillagers, or tyrants. We lived in peace once, and we can again.” Juul’s eyes fall to Niressa and my fingers dig into her scales, my heart pounding as I try to understand what’s happening.

“The humans are peaceful creatures, *for the most part*. They war amongst themselves, but their wars hardly touch our mountains—”

“They think themselves our betters,” Anna screams from the fray of dragons encircling her. “They think we are the beasts.”

“And so it usually is, when two different species cohabitate. The old dragons had the same problem with the elves,” Vitari snaps. “But we did not annihilate them.”

“They plan to invade the mountains,” Anna snarls. It’s hard to see her slim golden frame through the bodies surrounding her, but her tail drags the ground in a circle as she paces between her captors. “They will kill us all. Ask them.”

“Niressa, give me the girl,” Vitari sighs.

“No,” Niressa growls, lowering her head as if in a defensive position.

“Now,” the white dragon snaps, her wings flaring out from her sides. Her dangerous tail whips around over her head and I rush away from Niressa’s side. I spin a slow circle as I approach the white dragon, my eyes falling on all the massive beasts surrounding me. How strange to think there’s a human in the center of each of them.

“Treasure!” Niressa hisses behind me. The sound of her rushing forward meets my ears, but she never comes to my side. As I glance over my shoulder, I see a grey dragon blocking her path with its large body, its eyes riveted to me and the white dragon, just like Niressa’s. There’s so much in that gaze, so much that I don’t have words for.

“*I’ll be okay*,” I mouth. I hope that’s true.

“Brave little human,” the green dragon laughs, taking a seat on her hind legs as the white dragon lowers her head to meet my gaze.

“Is this true? Do the humans plan to *annihilate* us?”

I swallow hard, my mind flicking to the meeting in my father’s study. “It is,” I admit, holding the multicolored gaze of the massive white dragon

before me. “But, while Anna of Izvora tries to sway you, you should know, not all agree with a war with the dragons.”

“Anaka is a manipulative creature, as was her brother. Speak, so we can decide what is best for our people,” Vitari murmurs, her breath falling over my face like warm steam. I shudder, resisting the urge to take a step back, and instead raise my chin.

“My father grieves the loss of my mother, his queen. He has made . . . poor decisions . . . decisions founded on the lie that dragons are animals, on the fear that my mother’s death would somehow be repeated in our lives. People do the worst things out of fear and anger,” I murmur, trying my best to hold her gaze.

“Mmm, such is true of all species,” Vitari nods. “And what would you do differently, child?”

My heart pounds against my chest as I consider those words. I look over my shoulder at Niressa, then to my father where he stands behind a wall of knights.

“I would search for peace wherever I can find it. I would bury the pains of the past so that they might fertilize a time of prosperity for my people. Revenge—while satisfying—rarely does more than create more heartbreak.”

“Your revenge lies there,” Juul roars, nudging the body of the northern king toward my feet.

“Izvora killed my mother,” I whisper, my eyes shimmering with that truth. It makes sense. All the pieces of that information were given to me by Niressa since I’ve known her, but I never . . . it never *clicked*.

“Anaka was there, too,” Niressa calls behind me.

“And your vengeance,” Vitari snarls. “Yours waits for you, just there,” her wing opens, gesturing toward the circle of dragons holding Anna. The crowd splits around her and the golden dragon bursts free. She flaps her wings, desperately trying to launch herself into the sky, to escape the fate she knows is coming for her.

I watch as the grey dragon lets Niressa pass. She moves toward Anna, her limp less noticeable now. Both dragons are coated in blood, their scales battered and torn at the claws of their own kind.

“Niressa,” Anna pleads, her scales glistening in the moonlight.

“No.”

“Niressa! We were mated!”

My eyes go wide as Niressa pauses, her damaged wings rustling against her sides before she starts moving again. She lurches forward, her tail coming around Anna's neck.

In one deft movement, she pulls Anna's head to the side and shoves her claw into her chest. A roar like no other rips from her chest as Niressa steps backward, her scales shimmering. Before me, her scales recede into perfect brown skin and she stares down at the body of the blonde woman in the grass.

"No, we never were," she murmurs so quietly I can barely hear her.

"Vengeance has its place, child," Vitari murmurs beside me, drawing my gaze back to her. "Blood debts must be paid."

I nod my head, wincing with the motion. The white dragon steps back, tilting her head as she examines me. "You need to see a healer, child. I look forward to your rule." I open my mouth to speak but her next words interrupt me, "Niressa," she growls. "Care for your mate."

With that, Vitari and Juul lift into the sky and the other dragons follow, leaving Niressa and I standing amongst the knolls, surrounded by death. She rushes toward me, limping on human legs, her skin coated in blood. When she reaches me, she throws her arms around me and I whimper.

"Are you okay?"

"Sore," I murmur, staring at the bodies in the grass. "And . . . frightened. The Izvoras were dragons," I murmur.

"Yes," she admits, brushing my hair away from my face as she presses a kiss to my forehead.

"Taryn!" someone calls behind me, but I can't tear my eyes away from the beauty staring down into my eyes.

"I love you, Taryn of Vanir, with every scale of my body, with every hair on my head, no matter which form I take, my weakness is yours."

"Your weakness?"

"My heart," she murmurs as her thumb comes down to my chin. "My heart is yours."

My chest swells with emotion as the sound of armored men swarming toward us surrounds us. Quickly, I press my lips to hers, consequences be damned and whisper the words that would change everything:

"A heart is no weakness, Niressa. I love you."

A hand on my shoulder pulls me away from Niressa, from the monumental moment we were sharing, and I'm suddenly face to face with

Dary.

“You’re injured.” He shakes his head wiping blood from my hair line and I swat at his hand. “Fetch a healer!” he yells to no one in particular. Several knights move, but I can’t even tell whose colors they wear, right now. They could be Vanir or Tabistak knights, and I’d be none the wiser to the difference.

“I’m fine,” I insist, stepping away from his prodding fingers.

“Taryn,” Father gasps as he finally reaches my side, the jog across the knoll more exercise than he’s had in years. “My sweet, sweet, child,” he cries throwing his arms around me. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“I thought I’d lost me, too, Father.” I hug his neck tight, smiling against his shoulder as he squeezes me, even though it hurts.

“They’re *people*,” he murmurs in awe as he stares at the bodies of Aeron and Anna Izvora.

“All dragons are people,” Niressa interrupts and Father steps out of our embrace, walking toward her. She stands there, as nude as the day she was born, her light brown skin caked with blood and glistening in the moon and firelight, with her chin tipped up and her hair blowing in the wind as she faces down a king.

And I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more beautiful.

“You’re the dragon who stole my daughter?” My father asks, incredulous. A knight rushes forward and Niressa’s lip snarls up, her severe gaze causing him to pause. Slowly, he hands her a blanket, then backs away.

“I am,” she murmurs, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. It doesn’t hide all of her nudity, but gesture to accommodate her is something I will remember when I see that knight again.

“What’s happening?” Dary whispers beside me. “Is that . . . oh my Gods, Taryn. She’s the woman?”

“She is,” I whisper, watching in awe as my father wraps his arms around my love’s neck and hugs her tight. He’s shorter than her and the motion is awkward. Niressa tenses, her eyes widening with shock as she stares at me over my father’s shoulder.

“Thank you for catching her. When that gold dragon, Anna, or whatever her name is, dropped my daughter . . . I thought surely my heart would stop. You saved her.”

“I—”

“You are always welcome in Vanir,” he interrupts, shaking his head. “This is a strange time with strange facts, and I don’t presume to know how to navigate this new world I’ve witnessed tonight, but *you* are always welcome.”

Before Niressa can speak, Father turns around and comes back to face me, the flames of our home dancing in the reflection of his eyes. “We will have to rebuild it,” he murmurs, gesturing to the castle. “They’ve destroyed it.”

“We’ll make it better, this time,” I sigh, watching as a small woman comes tumbling down the knoll, her pale blue dress whipping around her as the wind catches it. “Mira?” I ask. As she draws closer, it becomes clear it’s Mira.

“Taryn!” she shouts across the knoll. “Dary!” she grips her dress in her hands, trying to make it across without falling again. “Are you alright?”

Before I can answer her, before I can move, Dary rushes across the grass and picks Mira up by the backs of her legs. She swats at his arm, glancing at the large group of people staring at the two of them.

“Dary of Tabistak, I—”

Dary slides her down his body until they’re face to face and presses his lips to hers. Mira doesn’t return the kiss at first, and though I can’t see her cheeks blush from this distance, I know they’re flaming under his attentions.

But soon, she relaxes. And as her body slides down his, her feet reaching the ground, their lips plucking at one another’s as they whisper words I can’t hear, I can’t help but feel . . . hope.

Even amongst the flames.

Even amongst the death.

Niressa comes to stand on the other side of me, her fingers lacing through mine as we watch a new love story unfold before us.

Even amongst the end of an era and the beginning of something new, the beginning of what I hope is a long, long peace between the humans and dragons of Lazoreat, there is love.

And where there is love, I realize, as I glance up at Niressa’s shimmering skin, there is *hope*.

And hope is what *I* treasure most in this world. If I could hoard it like the dragons, in a mountain keep, where I can dive into it and come out renewed, I would.

But surrounded like this, by those who love me, by those who I love, watching my two dearest friends kiss in front of my burning home, I realize I have no need to hoard it.

I have plenty.

LOVE AND CHAOS

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<3
Poppy

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Poppy is a writer of all the things. She has always enjoyed reading multiple genres with diverse couplings, so that's what she writes. Polyfic and Reverse Harem are her go to, but she also writes MF and FF. When Poppy isn't arguing with fictional characters, she can be found chasing her four year old around their Georgia home. On the off occasion that she isn't writing or momming, Poppy is usually reading.

If you catch a Poppy in the wild just remember: Cocktails and chocolate are a valid form of bribery.



To find out more about Poppy, you can check her out on her [website](#) or join her [facebook group](#).

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